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“Understanding Trends in Global Nutrition: The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity”

The benefits of fertile farmland and abundant natural resources are often taken for granted by the citizens of industrialized nations. Western European nations and the Americas alike have few obstacles in maintaining healthy nutrition when compared to the perils faced by sub-Saharan Africa. The population within East Africa has faced extreme poverty for far too long. When poor living conditions are paired with a dramatic rise in the prevalence of diseases such as Malaria and HIV/AIDS, the populations within Africa have no chance to combat the problems that plague their communities. The wealthiest nations on the globe have an obligation to help the world's citizens whom we have far surpassed in the utilization of technology and medical advancement.

While Africa as a whole is experiencing an improvement in social conditions, East Africa's economy continues to worsen. The people of Sub-Saharan Africa face nearly every element of oppression. With an ever-increasing prominence of disease combined with a lack of government aid and health care, it is unlikely that the region will ever have the opportunity to rise above its current state. The Sub-Saharan environment in Somalia makes it difficult to develop a consistent agricultural agenda. The Somali lack resources to develop their land, and at the current rate, any advancement is a long way off. The Somali will continue to use their inefficient technologies, and nutrition will lag behind for generations more to come. With the help of the world's wealthiest nations, commonly identified as the “G8,” perhaps we can ease the transition from absolute societal turmoil, to a time of prosperity. The United States, along with our colleagues (the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Russia, France, Italy, and Canada) have the financial security and technological means to help in ways that most African people can't even fathom. Not only could we provide a way to get the country out of its current and long lasting rut, we could inspire people to help one another. As the most advanced countries in the world it is our responsibility, and should be our goal, to empower African communities to support themselves, as well as establish a support system within the population. In doing so not only do we do the “right thing,” we also establish a valid trading partner.

Somali's quality of land is cause for more concern. As the birth rate increases, it outpaces the rate at which the land can heal after several seasons of harvest. The need for food is placing an impossible demand on the nutrient depleted soil. The harder the push for a greater agricultural profit from the land, the more growth decreases. Because East Africa's growing seasons are so short and as water becomes increasingly scarce, nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorous levels are falling. The quality of land is so devastatingly low that doubling the use of fertilizer and manure would do very little to help soil condition. An endless cycle is forming—the land is degenerating at the hands of the people, untrained and uninformed, and the people are facing hard times because the land just can't give enough.

A trend in family structure has appeared in recent years. As once nomadic tribes are settling among agriculturally dependent communities, some adjustment is in order. In addition to the confusion caused by conflicting cultures, much of Africa is undergoing urbanization. People who were once interdependent within their communities are flocking to the city in search for work. Men are leaving their families behind as labor needs arise somewhere else. Communities

are shattered and oftentimes women are left to pick up the pieces and raise their families. The influence of industrialized society is doing more harm than good in this respect.

A typical Somali family might live like this: A Bantu mother is raising seven children on her own while the father of her children works far away from home. She has just learned she is pregnant and is concerned for her five month old, who she will have to stop breast-feeding. She believes that breast-feeding a child while pregnant condones inappropriate contact between siblings. Because the five month old cannot eat nutritionally sound foods yet, he will no doubt be protein deprived. His growth will be stunted for a majority of his childhood unless something can be done to increase his protein intake. The mother is illiterate and knows little about agriculture. Without her husband's immediate financial and intellectual support, she and her children will struggle for food on a daily basis. Lately, a local organization has been hosting meetings in hopes of educating young mothers and their children. However, this organization suggests such absurd things as giving meat to infants, which is unheard of. Doing so would cause a child to disrespect social boundaries. It is common knowledge in the mother's community that a man is the first to be served, and a child's needs are lastly considered. As an alternative to meat, the organization suggests preparing eggs for children. It is widely believed in this region though, that eggs detract from one's intelligence. The mother will continue to feed her children corn and different varieties of fruit. She believes that quieting her children's hunger pains with foods like rice and other staple items will suffice to meet nutritional requirements.

Recently, the already overburdened mother has discovered that her two oldest children contracted typhoid fever. Her community's only water source is contaminated, and little can be done to prevent diseases from spreading. It is likely that she will lose her two children, as medicine and technology are not of priority in Somalia. Health care is nonexistent; without government aid the children's medicine cannot be purchased. With her family's current famine and lack of agricultural know-how, it seems as though a dead end is approaching. Perhaps she will relocate her family to Kenya, where Bantu families are living together learning about American life. Prejudice is pushing more and more Bantu families out of East Africa. The depletion of the family's culture puts more and more pressure on them to seek a safe haven elsewhere. As time passes the mother's options are running out, and she knows she has to make a decision soon.

It seems that this life of constant insecurity is common in Somalia. Nearly fifty percent of the Somali are ages 15 to 64. The other fifty percent is largely comprised of youths under fourteen years of age. The median age for Somali people is 17.5 years. The life expectancy for Somali people as calculated in 1999 was forty-eight years. The birth rate of the Somali continues to increase; the population finds slight balance because the mortality rate after about forty years of age is high as well. When compared with earlier recorded data, the findings from 1999 shows a slight increase in the quality of life for the people of Somalia, however the country's debt continues to increase. For the past ten years the rural society of Somalia has suffered due to a lack of central government. Currently, Muslim practices generally dictate the rights of individuals. Somali women give birth to an average of 7 children, as concluded by an estimate made in 2000; however it is not uncommon for a woman to give birth to up to 18 offspring. Child abuse has been observed as a prominent, and currently ignored, issue; the judicial system in Somalia favors the rights of men. A mere fourth of the female population is literate; the literacy rate is almost double for men.

The most abundant waterborne and airborne diseases are hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever. 69 percent of Somali have no access to a clean water source. Widespread water contamination (caused by deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion) has led to an ongoing

famine, which is accentuated by unfavorable climatic conditions (drought during the dry season, dust storms in the summer, and floods during the wet season). By implementing a system in which clean water can reach a majority of Somali, the famine would have a chance to be reduced. Again, a thing as simple as water treatment is taken for granted here in America.

Several generations of Somali Bantus aim to settle in America to escape persecution faced as a result of the apartheid outside South Africa, which was lifted in 1994. Civil war has also weakened the Bantus' unity and sense of equality. Adjustment to the new hemisphere will prove to be difficult. It is for this reason that refugee camps of forty thousand people have been set up in Kenya to create a stepping-stone from rural Somali life to America's more urban culture. In a program set up by the federal government, individuals will have up to 80 hours of cultural orientation and mentoring to aid in adjustment to American life. Recent genocide throughout East Africa has been caused by a constant competition for resources, which is yet another reason why nutrition needs to be recognized as the real problem. It seems that most social and economic problems in every part of the world, as faced by every walk of life, would be lessened if nutrition were a priority. Yet, the promise of profit sometimes greatly outweighs a community's desire to sustain a new generation.

Only recently (within the past few decades) did some nomadic tribes settle for good as the pressures from the African government and hunger pains persisted. Studies have shown that the tribes' children are suffering most from the social change. Their growth is stunted when compared to that of settled children in the region. Cash crops like coffee and cotton take precedence over the production of food. Since generations of once nomadic peoples are newly exposed to the concept of farming, they are forced to play catch up with surrounding territories; as a result competition for resources ensues. Rather than taking care of offspring and ensuring survival, groups focus on profit and land distribution.

65% of Somalia's export income is dependent upon agriculture. Saudi Arabia recently banned all livestock imports from Somalia due to "Rift Valley Fever" scares. The disease is spread by meat contamination and mosquitoes, and causes high fever and hepatitis. Somalia's economy can not currently support the destruction of all live stock that is suspect for contamination, as was done in Great Britain in the early nineties after the "Mad Cow Disease" fright. At the loss of Saudi Arabia as a trading partner, Somalia's economy is in need of a quick recovery. Because light industry exports hardly compare to agriculture in terms of incoming revenue for the region, it is unlikely that they can strengthen the industry enough to make up for the recent losses suffered. Given the conditions of land and resource currently held by Somalia, it would seem that agriculture has a long shot at fully developing or reaching its potential.

As it stands, Africa imports goods from nearly all of the "G8." Those who are suffering the most lack the political influence needed to demand a raise in import tariffs. Because industrialized nations are hardly taxed for bringing goods in, Africans gain very little from this trade. They give up irreplaceable natural resources in exchange for food they could grow themselves were they provided with a better idea of agricultural processes. The African people need to know that crops not only feed families, but make profit as well. Profit accumulates success; without success, extremely rural Somali four-year-olds will continue to walk around barefoot on ringworm-infested ground. A dollar a day will never buy a pair of shoes. If armed with the voice to make a change in governmental policy and agriculture, Africans could pull themselves out of the hole we have left them in. If we wish to spread true democracy, why not provide a way for other countries to reach it for themselves?

Somalia exports many varied agricultural products throughout Africa and to the Middle East, however the Somali themselves don't reap as much nutrition-based advantage as their neighbors. While the pressures of famine would no doubt be checked as a result of a boosted economy, it seems that a wiser route would be to feed the source of hunger pains—individual stomachs. The future of any country is undisputedly its youth, and as long as kids continue to get the short end of the stick, the Somali have a slim chance of provoking change. Economy, agricultural practices, technological and medical advancement, and society as a whole will continue as they are, not dramatically decreasing in quality, but never improving.

The only security some Africans seem to have now is their deeply rooted traditions, which is working against them in this day and age. There is nothing observed in any country as of yet to scientifically merit that meat affects the psychological processes of youths' minds, that eggs decrease one's intelligence, or that milk from a pregnant mother is inappropriate to feed a baby. More should be done to show the Somali that this is the case. In order for Somali society to take the necessary steps to improving overall productiveness and quality of life, education is needed for all.

Meat, rather than being a main export or a mode of nutrition first available men, should be prepared for children. An infant should not be denied breast milk, regardless of his or her mother's pregnancy. If this idea cannot be uprooted from communities, than perhaps more should be done to introduce contraceptives into Somali society. An easier route, though, would most likely be to employ more nutritionally sound elements into food that the Somali children eat on a regular basis. Since protein consumption is lacking in children fourteen years and younger, perhaps adding a soy supplement to children's daily ingestion of corn or sorghum (cultivated as grain or syrup) could help strengthen overall nutritional balance. Another example of a healthy additive is nonfat dry milk, which is nonperishable, can be added to almost anything, and is an excellent source of protein and calcium.

The average African citizen is not remotely aware of the nutritional knowledge and developments we have here in America, such as the capacity to create genetically modified foods. It is also true the average American lacks the perspective to empathize with the daily battles faced by the Somali, men, women, and children. The people of many industrialized nations don't know what kind of support to offer. Individuals can offer, if nothing else, moral support. The signing of a petition or the backing of a promise as set out by the leaders of our nations could make all the difference.

The bottom line is that children are taking the fall for their country's economic and social confusion, parents' unawareness, our country's near-indifference, and a global lack of perspective. Clan warring is prohibiting the United Nations from taking any real action, and many humanitarians recognize Somalia as a danger zone as a result of the constant civil and clan warfare. At the end of the day, children's lives need to be of priority. We, as the most advantaged citizens of the world, can make this so by creating broader outreach programs. Education about agriculture, child-care, new technologies, and medicine should reach the ears of the Somali people. Our governments, parliamentary and presidential systems alike, should do more to ensure that a central government is established within East Africa.

It needs to be said that it is not enough to throw money at a problem. International organizations should raise a volunteer effort to combat ignorance and unresponsiveness. Real change works from the ground up—individuals can trigger the growth that East Africa, and Somalia in particular, has needed for so long. If a face were provided for this movement it could

be all the more powerful. There is a need for an international band of people who are empathetic for the cause. A universal education of the issues is in order—true empathy cannot be realized if Africa's condition continues to be masked. While it is not expected that half the world can drop everything and rush to physically aid the world's impoverished, it *is* expected and should be guaranteed that we'll all do our part in even the tiniest way to make life a little more bearable for those worse off than us. The idea that we can help one another, as a race of humans, undivided by social, political, or religious boundaries, is what makes living in this day and age unique from any previous span of time.

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