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Poverty and its Effect on Malnutrition in the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic.

There's a Mexican proverb that says: "The right time to eat is: for a rich man when he is hungry, and for a poor man when he has something to eat." There are few proverbs more true in today's world than this one. In this world we have those with very little money who are underweight and undernourished, and we have those with a lot of money who are overweight and yet are still undernourished. This is one of life's great paradoxes. Some people have too much food, but yet we still have people without enough. In a world where people make themselves sick from overeating, we have those who are sick from not having anything to eat at all. The food that isn't good enough for some is a feast to others; all too often these people live right next to each other. Human greed prevents those that have everything from helping those that have nothing. There are people who are so impoverished that they can't even afford food, or shelter. Sometimes entire countries have trouble finding enough food for their people because of nationwide poverty.

One country whose malnourishment is gravely affected by its poverty is the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (hereafter known as Laos). A typical Laotian family consists of a mother and a father who have on average four to six children. Families live in rural villages of two to three hundred people living in only forty to fifty houses. The houses are built on poles so that during floods the house will not be swept away, and it also provides a source of shade when resting. A vast percentage of Laotian families are subsistence farmers, and the main dietary source is rice. Laotians as a whole have very little food, and are barely growing enough to keep themselves alive. The average income of a family is approximately the equivalent of one hundred American dollars. Only seventy-six percent of adult men and fifty-three percent of adult women are literate. A mere sixty-four percent of boys are enrolled in primary school, and just fifty-nine percent of girls are enrolled. As for secondary school, forty seven men and thirty four women were enrolled in secondary school between the years of 1998 and 2002.

The people of Laos are so impoverished they can't afford tractors or any other machinery to aid them in their farming; even entire villages are incapable of purchasing a community tractor. For this reason they generally rely on oxen for their heavy labor such as plowing. The children in a Laotian family generally take care of the family's animals and help their parents when they can. Laotian women tend to do household chores, care for children and do small garden work, whereas the men bring animals to market, hunt, and fix things. Working

in the fields is a job that includes both men and women. Although women have a respected voice in politics it is frequently the men who do the speaking and decision making for the family, and the community. This poverty stricken country is one of the ten poorest countries in the world, one of the least developed countries in the world, and is slow to develop an open market economy; all of which contribute to its continued high rate of malnutrition.

Poverty is a factor that limits nearly every aspect of Laotian life. One of the major impacts it has is the limitation of proper nutrition, and nutritional supplements. The fact that most Laotians are subsistence farmers destroys their ability to advance economically. They don't tend to have anything extra to sell which means they won't be making much money, and therefore cannot buy new modern equipment which restricts agricultural progress. Lack of money forces almost all Laotians to produce rice, even though most of the soil is sandy and poor for growing food of any kind. There is a general dietary lack of vitamin A, iodine, and numerous other vitamins and minerals that are necessary to live a healthy life. Although new foods are being introduced they are still too expensive for the average Laotian to afford. Fourteen percent of children are born underweight, and forty percent of children under five are moderately to severely underweight. Fifteen percent of children suffer from wasting, loss of strength and vigor, and forty one percent suffer from stunting, not reaching their full growth potential. Over two thirds of the population live in rural settings, and although they are the ones who most need assistance they also are the ones who are least likely to benefit from any improvements. This can be attributed to their distance from urban economic centers where they can get a fair price for what they sell. At times families must move miles to another village looking for land to farm on, and it is rare for a family to have more than one rice paddy.

The Laotian government cannot provide adequate services to the people. From the years 1991 through 1995 the budget deficit was greater than ten percent of the gross domestic product. Over half of the government budget is provided by external assistance. Although Laos has the capability of thriving lumber, mining, and hydro power industries the current lack of money limits developments in these projects. Raw material exports are beginning to be a source of income for the country, however lack of sufficient infrastructure and limits on education cripple the production market. Garments and motorcycles are the two largest post-production exports from Laos, but both have limited value and tend to be adversely affected by market fluctuation. Laos has a communist government which until recently had a centrally controlled economy, and has now implemented a weak market economy. In 1995 the United States agreed to normalize trade relations with Laos; an act that stimulated the Laotian economy.

Laos is not only one of the least developed countries in the world but also is ranked as one of the top ten poorest countries in the world. The rural poor are the most disadvantaged

because of their lack of access to the central urban economic hubs. The soil is sandy, and the frequent floods and droughts destroy its fertility. Fertilizers are too expensive for the average Laotian to purchase, and therefore the soil remains limited in productivity. Children commonly have distended abdomens, and many die from cases of diarrhea. A number of children are affected by noma which is a condition typically found in malnourished children who have suffered a major disease. Noma eats away at the lips and the cheeks, preventing jaw movement and causing further malnutrition. Children rarely survive noma and those who do are horribly disfigured for life. Vitamin deficiencies cause poor eyesight and sometimes when their eyes bother them enough and if they can afford it a person will have one of their eyes removed.

Gross domestic product per capita is the equivalent of three hundred fifty American dollars. Life expectancy is fifty-one years. Seventy-three percent of Laotians lack access to sanitation, and sixty percent don't even have safe drinking water. Iodine deficiency affects ninety-five percent of the population. Health care is inadequate and AIDS is starting to appear in Laos. The lack of funding for health care costs the Laotian people thousands of lives that would have been saved in better developed countries.

As Laos moves out of its command economy and into a market economy poverty is moving into a slow yet comforting downward trend. The United States is introducing silkworms to the Laotian people as a means of income. The United Nations has numerous projects meant to develop Laos and make them more self-sufficient. These projects include making a shift from subsistence farming to farming enough to sell at market. This would stimulate the economy, increase trade, and allow the Laotian government to offer better services to the Laotian people. Life in general appears to be slowly improving for the Laotian people. Urbanization is increasing which improves access to markets, and easier access to markets means more money.

All of the factors that poverty limits will improve when poverty is decreased. As those factors, such as closeness to markets, increase in health care, etc. are improved poverty will continue to decline. If farmers had the money to buy new machinery or try new agricultural methods they would have more money which would mean they could buy even newer and more advanced machinery. If rural farmers had more money they could move to a more urban setting which would give them more access to money. Having more money would also allow farmers to grow crops other than rice and also to fertilize the soil. They can grow more food and better food, which will improve their health. Laos has the ability and the resources to become a great asset to the entire world if it is given the chance and enough money.

After conducting my research, I recommend that national governments improve trade relations with Laos. Since the United States began normal trade with Laos its economy has steadily improved, and its deficit has decreased. Also other nations will need to share

technology and research with Laos so that they may become properly developed, and become more self-sufficient. International organizations should send in people to teach the Laotians and help them improve their own research. Laos also could use aid in controlling their floods; limiting floods would reduce damages and an irrigation system could be introduced. Reducing flooding and improving irrigation would allow the soil to become more fertile and less sandy. Private and civic organizations can send money to Laos so that it may pay for improvements and improve the economy. Organizations can offer affordable loans to the Laotian people so that they may establish good credit. Another thing that groups could do to greatly improve the living conditions of the Laotian people is to remove all undetonated military ordinance that are littering the landscape after the Vietnam War. If other nations and private organizations provide help in getting the Laotian people started they should quickly be able to fend for themselves with minimal aid from anybody.

The same principles apply to all poor countries. Governments and organizations need to work together to find cheaper and easier ways to produce food. If food were cheaper and easier to produce, poor countries could afford to grow it or buy it. Funds can be given to the poor so that they might be able to afford food and shelter. Developed nations need to help developing nations with their education system so that more people are properly educated, and that will lead to extensive growth in the number of doctors and scientists and other necessary professionals.

In conclusion I believe that the Laotian people need to make vast improvements to their economy, their farming practices, and to several other aspects of their everyday life, such as improving roadways so that it is easier to get to and from the market, or to increase the number of available markets so that people don't need to travel as far to get to them. The people of Laos need to improve their farming techniques by diversifying crops. Laos is an extremely poor nation that is having immense amounts of trouble taking care of itself. However they don't need excessive amounts of aid; with minor nudges from the U.N., the United States, and other nations and organizations, the Laotian people have proven themselves capable of greatly advancing themselves and improving their way of life. Laos has gargantuan potential to benefit the entire world; all that it needs is just a little bit of monetary aid for it to improve explosively.

This small undernourished nation has the potential to be an important supplier of food to the entire world. All that they need is time, money, and support. With help from other countries Laos could quite possibly become a world superpower if they are given enough time. A Laotian scientist could be the one who discovers the perfect clean burning alternative to gasoline. Perhaps it will be a Laotian doctor that finds a cure for cancer, or polio, or AIDS, but none of this can occur unless poverty is eradicated from Laos. Ultimately the greatest source of

malnutrition stems from the immense amount of poverty. With all the contributions Laos is capable of, how can we afford not to give them aid?

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