

Alexa Brincks
Kuemper Catholic High School
Carroll, Iowa
Kenya, Factor 11: Malnutrition

How Kenya Has Hit Its All-Time Low

“We are running out of words to describe the situation in affected parts of Kenya, and across the region,” said Fatoumata Nafu-Traore (*Al Jazeera* [2]). There has been a recent and ongoing drought in Kenya that has left many with little to no money, no water, and no food. Many are now malnourished, and it continues to get worse. “Malnutrition is faulty nutrition due to inadequate or unbalanced intake of nutrients or their impaired assimilation or use” (Merriam-Webster). Around 25,000 people around the world die every day because of malnutrition and hunger. Malnutrition does not only mean that one is hungry and starved, but it also comes with an increase in likeliness of illnesses, shorter life span, and physical well-being deteriorates. Many countries do not have a shortage of food, in fact, they have a surplus, but many people are still underfed. In recent years, Kenya has suffered from a long drought, making it very unstable and harder for crops to yield. The number of malnourished people in Kenya has nearly doubled, and the drought continues (*Al Jazeera* [1]).

There are two types of hunger: PEM (protein-energy malnutrition) and micronutrient deficiency. Protein-energy malnutrition is the type of hunger that is being referred to when discussing world hunger. This type is more dangerous and causes growth failure, which can lead to death. Types of growth failure are moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), severe acute malnutrition (SAM), wasting, nutritional edema, and stunting. These all have to do with the growth of a person and can cause even more problems if they occur. The second kind of malnutrition, micronutrient deficiency, is a lack of vitamins and minerals, although not as severe it is still important (Lam [1-2]). As of 2017, there were 370,000 children who were considered acutely malnourished; 72,600 “are suffering from the most severe form which requires life-saving care” (UNICEF [1]).

Malnutrition is very dangerous in kids because it can prevent them from growing, not only physically, but emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. “Both hunger and obesity can reduce a person's physical fitness, increase susceptibility to illness, and shorten lifespan. In addition, children deprived of adequate nutrients during development can suffer from permanently reduced mental ability. At the national level, poor eating hampers educational performance, curtails economic productivity, increases the burden of health care, and reduces general well-being. Confronting this epidemic of poor eating will have widespread benefits (Gardner and Halweil [2]).” The government of Kenya has been trying to work with organizations such as UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund), but they can only do so much.

Different programs are trying to come in and save as many kids as possible, but the scarcity of food and lack of nutrients are beating the help that is being given. “We have reached 60 percent more children with life-saving assistance in the first half of 2017 compared to 2016, yet more and more children are becoming malnourished,” said Werner Schultink (UNICEF [1]).

Malnutrition is far worse in children than in adults, with that being said, it is not any less concerning or important. It is essential for a child to get the proper nutrition and care so that they may thrive. If their needs are not addressed now, while they are still growing, what does that mean for the future of the country? This problem cannot continue to be pushed to the side because the children are the future and without them the country has no way to grow.

The Drought

The recent drought that Kenya has experienced has left more people hungry and has made water harder to find. Many Kenyans face life and death every day because of growing poverty. Streets are often littered, even in rural areas. A lot of the country does not have running water because it is too expensive, so many just go to the river, but the water has become so scarce that many must walk three times the distance they normally would (*Al Jazeera* [2]).

Around 175,000 children are not attending primary school because of the drought, and many of these kids only receive one meal per day. The drought has resulted in less food being produced and an increase in the price of it, making it very difficult for families to buy enough. Kids are very distracted in classrooms because all they can think about is how hungry they are. Some students have even stopped attending because of the horrible drought conditions. When kids do want to go to school, many families can't afford school uniforms. This is more money that many do not have.

Locals in Baringo County, Kenya have noticed that even the animals are malnourished. The cows are thin, and goats try to eat leaves off wild bushes. The only water that is seen often so dirty that the animals will not drink it (Nelson [5]). This ongoing drought is affecting everyone, including animals. We must intervene.

Causes of Malnutrition

The drought has taken many jobs including agricultural occupations. Agriculture employs 61 percent of Kenya's workforce, though it is responsible for less than a third of earnings" (*CultureGrams Online Edition, "Did You Know?"*). This is a huge problem because not only does it cause unemployment, there are three million people in need of food assistance in Kenya (Nelson [14]). One of the main occupations for men is farming and with the drought, there has been no crop and nothing for farmers to do. This has left many jobless and many families with only one source of income, which is usually less than one dollar. Many children are malnourished because a dollar simply cannot cover the costs of providing for an entire family. Things that are part of the budget include food and school uniforms. Many choose food because they are already hungry and do not eat much the way it is. This budget does not include electricity because it is too expensive.

Another factor in Kenya is the lack of healthcare. Many do not have the access or resources to go to the doctor and the government-funded hospitals are very poorly run. They often rely on more traditional practices and try to heal naturally, although Western medicine is becoming more accepted. According to the World Factbook, Kenya has 1.5 million people currently living with HIV/AIDS, as of 2017 (*Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Kenya"*). In recent years HIV has become very widespread and has created a lower life expectancy, but the government has taken steps to help slow down the progression (*CultureGrams Online Edition, "Kenya: Health"*).

People aren't the only ones looking for food, there are many animals that are being affected by the drought as well. "Realize that 82% of the world's starving children live in countries where food is fed to animals that are then killed and eaten by more well-off individuals in developed countries like the US, UK, and in Europe. One-fourth of all grain produced by third world countries is now given to livestock, in their own country and out" (*Oppenlander* [2]). In countries like Kenya, exporting food should not be the first-place food goes, it should stay in the country and feed those who don't have anything. There are around 33 million people in Kenya and over half of them live off less than \$1 a day (*Barasa* [3]).

Logically it makes sense to feed livestock in hopes of trying to sell them for money, but the condition and the health of the people in Kenya continues to deteriorate. Instead of feeding the livestock, the focus needs to be on the people. Once the health and nourishment of people increases and the numbers get better than we can put more effort into helping the livestock. Right now, there is no one to buy these animals so putting valuable money and food into animals isn't helping anyone; it's just hurting more people.

Solutions to Malnutrition

Here are some possible solutions that could be used to help end malnutrition in Kenya: First working with other countries to receive food from different programs, second, a possible banking system that would help families and individuals better manage their money, third, the production of wells, and finally, a new micro-nutrient supplement that could be taken and would give a person multiple vitamins by taking this.

First off, the government and other countries are trying to help the people of Kenya by sending and supplying food, but too often there are more people than there is food. There have been small food shelters set up around the country in various towns, but this does not even begin to fulfill the hunger of those people. In some towns, the people have become so hungry and desperate they hunt stray dogs for food. Getting help from other countries is one way to get food, but it's not always the easiest or most effective.

Secondly, a banking system. Leora Klapper found that a lot of people don't know how to manage their money. For example, farming is a very unpredictable profession, sometimes there is flooding, sometimes there is a drought, and farmers are constantly worrying about insects eating all their crop. The point being is that sometimes farmers only get paid a few times a year, they do not have a weekly income that they rely on, and with no banking system, there is no way to tell how much money they really have and eventually it will just run out (Klapper [3]). This comes with cons, but in the end, it could be very helpful to those who aren't as wealthy as others. This could be a very effective, efficient, safe and simple way to help Kenyans manage their money in a reasonable way.

There are already some banks set up throughout Kenya that have a monetary system in place. Creating more banks or branches would also solve problems as there would be greater access. Eventually, the banks could be set up in smaller counties and cities, in hopes that those who live out in the country could take advantage of these. The Kenya School of Monetary Studies appears to be a current step in this direction but may need additional help with this mission.

Part of the reason there is malnutrition is because in the past few years Kenya has had an extreme drought and it has been difficult to yield any crops. Now there isn't a whole lot that Kenyans can do about a drought, but with the help of other countries it is possible that wells could be drilled, and more people could be given potable drinking water. These wells would last a while and make it easier for more people to get water.

Programs like The Water Project are already doing things like this over in Kenya, but they aren't always efficient, inexpensive, and productive. There are two main types of wells: hand-dug and shallow wells. Hand-dug wells can be very dangerous because those who are digging the well are often inexperienced and digging 50 feet into the ground by hand isn't the safest. There are also shallow wells which are low cost and make a hole about 150 feet deep, but they rely on donors to provide rigs (machines that dig the hole) but the water stays clean and is ready for drinking (The Water Project, "Digging Water Wells in Africa - How It Works").

These wells not only provide water sustainable for drinking, but water could be used to grow plants. There wouldn't be enough water for fields of crops, but enough that families could grow gardens. They could grow vegetables and fruits that have their missing nutrients, and this would not only help feed them, but provide the proper nutrients they need to survive.

Recently, scientists have proposed the idea of this multi-nutrient/vitamin that if taken regularly, it would supply pregnant woman and children with enough vitamins to be healthy. Creating this multi-nutrient would help save mothers and it would be able to help children get the nutrients and vitamins they need. This idea would potentially be able to help 50 million kids around the world, but it does come with a price, it would cost about \$700 million every year. But in maternal deaths alone, there are around 115,000 every single year because of iron deficiency (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, "5 Ways to End Malnutrition").

Women make up a little over half the population in Kenya and the key health problems associated with women are all related to pregnancy, childbirth, and puerperium (fever caused by uterine infection after childbirth). All these problems could be easily avoided if they are given proper attention. Like mentioned before, AIDS has become a concern and is frequently treated before other health problems (Patel [2]). Kenya doesn't have a lot of health care funding, partly because the country is so poor, but funding is also put towards other things such as education. The health of people needs to stop being overlooked and addressed. The multi-nutrient/vitamin would be for expecting mothers, lactating or nursing mothers, and children only. Women face discrimination in every aspect of life and addressing their health problems is crucial in keeping the economy alive. This nutrient vitamin would also be for children because they are the future of this country and it is essential to start somewhere, so why not start with the kids?

The distribution of this nutrient vitamin would not be a first come first serve but based on the severity of the malnourishment. GAIN (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, "5 Ways to End Malnutrition") currently has an organization that is working with health providers and teaching governments how to access and finance costs to these micronutrients. These researchers, health providers, and government officials can work together to better inform the population and as a result save more precious lives.

In conclusion, the poverty of Kenya is not going to go away fast, but over time the malnutrition in Kenya can be resolved. It may take multiple years, but nothing comes with the snap of your fingers. Whether you dig wells for water, create a banking system to manage money, or take a multi-nutrient vitamin you will move Kenya closer to a healthy sustainable culture. Every small step will be a step in the right direction.

Works Cited

- Al Jazeera. "Number of Kenyans Going Hungry Doubles to Three Million." *Kenya News / Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 28 Mar. 2017, www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/number-kenyans-hungry-doubles-3-million-170328110811329.html.
- Barasa, Mildred. "Rural Poverty in Kenya." *Contemporary Review*, Autumn 2007, p. 294+. *General OneFile*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A173515421/ITOF?u=0999kchs&sid=ITOF&xid=19593187>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2019.
- "Did You Know?" *CultureGrams Online Edition*, ProQuest, 2019, http://online.culturegrams.com/world/world_country.php?cid=85&cn=Kenya. Accessed 11 March 2019.
- "Digging Water Wells in Africa - How It Works." *The Water Project*, The Water Project, thewaterproject.org/digging-wells-in-africa-how-it-works.
- "5 Ways to End Malnutrition." *Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition*, 14 Oct. 2014, www.gainhealth.org/knowledge-centre/five-ways-can-help-end-malnutrition-3/.
- Gardner, Gary, and Brian Halweil. "Escaping Hunger, Escaping Excess." *World Watch*, 2000, pp. 24-35. *SIRS Issues Researcher*, <https://sks.sirs.com>.
- "Kenya: Health." *CultureGrams Online Edition*, ProQuest, 2019, http://online.culturegrams.com/world/world_country_sections.php?cid=85&cn=Kenya&sname=Health&snid=22. Accessed 11 March 2019.
- Klapper, Leora. "How This One Change Can Help People Fight Poverty." *Pakistan & Gulf Economist*, vol. 37, no. 33, 19 Aug. 2018. *General OneFile*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/=A550831131/ITOF?u=0999kchs&sid=ITOF&xid=6d2e298e>
- Lam, Crystal. "World Hunger, Poverty Facts, Statistics 2018." *World Hunger News*, 25 May 2018, www.worldhunger.org/world-hunger-and-poverty-facts-and-statistics/#children1.
- "Malnutrition." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, 16 Mar. 2019, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/malnutrition.
- Nelson, Katie G. "As Drought Conditions Worsen, Famine Looms over Kenya." *Public Radio International*, Global Post, 14 Apr. 2017, www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-14/drought-conditions-worsen-famine-looms-over-kenya.
- Oppenlander, Richard. "Comfortably Unaware: The World Hunger-Food Choice Connection: A Summary." *Comfortably Unaware*, 22 Apr. 2012, <http://comfortablyunaware.com/blog/the-world-hunger-food-choice-connection-a-summary/>.
- "The World Factbook: Kenya." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 1 Feb. 2018, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ke.html.
- UNICEF. "Nutrition Crisis Deepening Across Kenya." *UNICEF*, UNICEF, 15 Sept. 2017, www.unicef.org/press-releases/nutrition-crisis-deepening-across-kenya.