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Myanmar, Malnutrition

Myanmar: Defeating Malnutrition by Cultivating Stability, Prosperity, and Progress

Heart-wrenching cries fill the stiflingly hot air. A young woman sits inside her small house. Her name is Dil Kaayas, and when she found out she would be a mother, her heart leapt for joy. But now, it pounds in her head. “What if she dies?” she wonders. At this thought, her baby, Noor Bu Shar screams again, pleading for something to stop the aching in her empty stomach. Neither she nor her mother has eaten a nutritious meal in a week. Just one among thousands of hungry children in Myanmar, Noor Bu Shar is only eighteen months old and already showing signs of stunted growth and failure to thrive. She could be dead in weeks, or mere days (UNICEF).

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is a country in southeast Asia, first recorded in 1057 as a unified state by Buddhist King Anawrahta. In the following centuries, Myanmar was occupied by the Mongolian and Toungoo dynasties before its annexation to Britain in the early 1900s. The next years saw Myanmar constantly caught in the middle of political strife, bouncing between the control of Japan and the UK before eventually gaining its independence in 1948 as a democratic nation. However, Myanmar’s election of 1960 inflamed internal political conflict, and the military seized control from Prime Minister U Nu (Aung-Thwin et al.). Throughout the next six decades, elections came and went, completely ignored by the military junta. Any form of rebellion was heartlessly silenced. But a storm brewed as activists like Aung San Suu Kyi preached the hope of democracy and peace and rose to power. Slowly, it seemed the junta faded into the background as the people freed themselves from the corrupted elections of the past (Maizland). But then, disaster struck. In February of 2021, a military coup stormed the house of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, arrested her, and once again took full control of Myanmar (“Myanmar Profile - Timeline”).

Ever since the coup threw Myanmar back into the ravages of a political nightmare, the citizens of the country have plunged into an economic crisis. Myanmar has a predominantly agrarian economy, producing rice, maize, chickpeas, and sesame (“Burma - Agriculture”). In the late 1930s, the country exported more than half of the world’s rice (Jayasuriya); however, political conflict would change Myanmar from a successful agricultural power into one of the most underdeveloped countries internationally.

Stunted growth is defined by growth statistics greater than two standard deviations below the median growth statistics for a child of a specific age (“Stunting in a Nutshell”). Stunting rates as a result of malnutrition in infants and young children have skyrocketed to as high as 42.7% in 2003. Due to some relief from United Nations and World Bank funding, that rate slightly decreased to 26.7% in 2018; still, one in every four children in Myanmar experiences stunted growth before they are five years old (“Country Nutrition Profiles”). The fight against malnutrition in Myanmar depends on food security through improved stability, prosperity, and progress.

Firstly, Myanmar’s history of political conflict is doomed to define the future of the country if the people remain unable to unify, paralyzed by the power of the junta. Most of the military’s strategy centers around unexpected attacks that quell attempts at rebellion. The power of the junta comes from the fear of the people (Maizland). The junta has ruthlessly destroyed farmlands, villages, and homes. The small farmers of Myanmar have a common grievance that can be a powerful force in creating a strong community, but “it is not...possible to significantly reduce conflict in fragile and poor countries...without significant new investment and partnerships in key areas of agriculture and rural development” (Bora et al.). Relief efforts that only provide money, seeds, or advice may temporarily suspend malnutrition and stunting rates;

however, as proved by the decline of Myanmar since 2000, they do not truly attack the heart of the issues in this country (“Country Nutrition Profiles”).

As a result, new measures must be taken to offset the effects of the junta’s rule, as well as setting Myanmar on the path to stability and peace. Thriving small farmers can create unified cultural goals and ideals. The key to efforts for stability in Myanmar is not military power; it is the unification of the people. Often, a few farmers provide most of the food necessary for one village, but when conflict rages through the area, everything is destroyed (Paddock). International and national organizations that send advocates and instructors to educate farmers worldwide should not only highlight the importance of sustainable agriculture practices, but foster communication, relationships, and stronger community bonds between small farmers in the same region. For example, the USDA’s International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program seeks to train U.S. citizens to “assist developing countries in establishing school-based agricultural education and youth extension programs” (“International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program”). This program works to train educators and foreign advocates to share valuable and effective skills with farmers worldwide, and this kind of education is vital for a country like Myanmar. Instead of merely bandaging the problem, agricultural instruction dresses the wound, creating a future full of opportunity for growth. In addition, communication through common media platforms, as well as occasional regional meetings will immediately help farmers by expanding their knowledge and experiences. They will learn to collaborate by trading crops and seeds for hardier varieties developed by their neighbors, sharing and innovating to create efficient agriculture practices.

Looking to the future, however, relationships between small farmers will also proactively help ensure food security for villages raided by the junta. The military seeks to destabilize the citizens of Myanmar because that instability renders the people helpless. Isolation is dangerous. But when strong relationships exist between farmers in the same region, and by extension villages, stability can begin to thrive by diminishing the threat of hunger and unifying the people. Farmers from thriving villages can share resources, seeds, and food with those from struggling villages. Whole regions can rediscover the culture they were forced to abandon, bringing a powerful coalition of people together to strive for one cause: peace.

Secondly, Myanmar’s sub-tropical monsoon climate requires specific methods of farming that will increase crop yields and thereby increase the prosperity of the nation. A sub-tropical monsoon climate has three main seasons: a “hot, dry inter-monsoonal” season; a “rainy southwest monsoon” season; “and [a] cool, relatively dry northeast monsoon” season (“World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal”). However, two of the three main seasons in this climate are not ideal for most crops. Rice, maize, and wheat prove to be the most productive in countries with vastly contrasting seasons (Lemmons). Farmers should concentrate on developing new methods to grow these crops efficiently.

In addition, efforts to educate farmers, funded by governmental or non-governmental organizations (such as CARE or Save the Children), may find value in introducing agricultural improvements developed in other tropical countries such as the Zai System of farming. The Zai System includes digging holes in rows across fields and filling them with leaves and manure. Termites are drawn to the compost, burrowing through the soil to create tiny tunnels to allow for better irrigation. The holes, also called “zais,” collect water during the rainy season, and water is retained by the compost layer (Agriculture for Impact). In addition, the zais retain an exceptionally high concentration of nutrients due to the layers of organic matter. The Zai System would allow Myanmar farmers to address one of the main downsides of the sub-tropical monsoon climate: dry seasons. Even during dry seasons, the soil will retain both natural nutrients and water, allowing for sustainable intensification of crop yields and more nutritious foods throughout the year—enough to provide food for every table (Danso-Abbeam et al.).

Due to the ability to cultivate and export different varieties of crops in larger quantities, Myanmar can once again achieve a successful agrarian economy. As such, greater prosperity will cause malnutrition and rates of stunted growth in young children to decrease (Admin.). The nutrients unavailable through crops produced internally in Myanmar, such as iron, iodine, and vitamin A, can be found in foods exported by neighboring countries (China, Bangladesh, etc.). The growing prosperity of Myanmar due to sustainable intensification of crop yields will allow for increased trade with surrounding countries and between regions that produce slightly different exports (Burma - Agriculture). International interactions are vital for the progress and development of Myanmar. The country's current isolation is a major detriment to the people's efforts against the military, as it is difficult to gain physical support (supplies, soldiers, etc.) when very few international pathways exist. Thus, increased trade also opens doors for greater stability within Myanmar.

Finally, food security is one of the keys that will allow Myanmar to progress by fostering forward-thinking citizens. Families who have access to sufficient food and water no longer need to force their children to work in the fields. Instead, they can turn their eyes toward the future of their country (Haga).

Children in less developed countries who live in food secure households are more likely to attend school (Tamiru and Belachew). While not every family will send their children to school, global aid organizations (in partnership with the Ministry of Education) can advocate for education and provide the resources to build more schools and hire teachers. World Vision International, an NGO currently working in Burma, has increased the availability of the most basic education, as well as raising literacy rates in the country ("Education"). However, many children lack the time and freedom to attend these programs, even if they are available. Thus, education and food security must work together to allow for countries to advance toward new ideas and developments. When children receive education, they learn how to benefit the society they live in agriculturally and intellectually. Educated people are driven to test, discover, and advance. They push towards seemingly impossible goals and accomplish them (Pollard and Booth). Education will not only aid in the overall advancement of Myanmar, but it will also develop new ways to approach agriculture and decrease malnutrition without the need for external aid, creating a virtuous cycle (Coleman-Jensen).

Now, some may argue that the United States should first address national concerns before meddling in the affairs of other nations. However, the values behind American ideals necessitate international efforts for peace, education, and full stomachs. Throughout history, America has been known as the land of opportunity, the home of the American dream, where anyone from anywhere can do anything their heart desires. But the prosperity and success of this country does not come without responsibility. As one of the most developed nations in the world, the U.S. is charged to seek to support less developed countries.

Perhaps the very heart of American values is freedom. The U.S. is characterized by the belief that, within reason, every individual is free to have ideas, values, and opinions that differ from others'. Every individual is free to pursue dreams and goals. Should all humans not be given that opportunity? Thus, it is in the best interest of the U.S. to continue to fund foreign aid projects, such as those that should be undertaken in Myanmar. Not only does this create future opportunities for equally deserving individuals in less developed countries, but more practically, it makes future trade and support connections possible. As the British Parliament puts it, foreign aid focuses on matters "which are important to a globally-focused UK and where we can have the greatest life-changing impact in the long-term" (Taylor). While the U.S. most definitely needs to address internal problems, this does not mean ignoring international problems. American influence is both beneficial and necessary, when introduced appropriately, in creating a safe, healthy, thriving democratic country. Myanmar needs a good example in the midst of political turmoil, and the United States has been and should continue to support the country's efforts to defend individual rights and freedoms.

All in all, food security is crucial in defeating malnutrition through improved stability, prosperity, and progress in Myanmar. The story of young Noor Bu Shar ends in success. A UNICEF-supported therapeutic program implements a treatment that vastly improves her weight and health, and “according to her mother... ‘She is more playful now and already her weight has increased by one kilogram’” (UNICEF). But not all stories of malnutrition in Myanmar end well. The future of this country rests in the hands of the farmers who put food on the table for their families and villages. And they must be pushed to foster strong communication between villages; practice efficient, sustainable farming methods; and nurture an educated next generation that will create a brighter future for Myanmar.

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