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Honduras, Malnutrition

Malnutrition and Poverty in Honduras

In order to have a secure foundation in any country, the number one priority should always be health and safety. The country of Honduras is located in Central America and is situated between El Salvador and Guatemala. It has a population of 10.72 million and as of 2023, 57.8% of the population is urban and 42.2% of the population is rural. Honduras is under a Democratic Constitutional Republic and the current president is Xiomara Castro. About 32 percent of the country is cultivated as agricultural land with major crops including plantains, maize, beans, rice, and bananas. Some of the major exports to Honduras in 2023 were corn, pork, wheat, dairy products, and rice.(USDA, 2023). The average farm size in Honduras is about three hectares, considerably smaller than the average farm size in the United States, and comparable to around seven and a half football fields (Michigan State University, 2017). The climate in Honduras has a relatively hot and tropical climate in the lowlands, and a more temperate climate in the highlands. It experiences a dry season in the summer and a wet season in the spring (World Bank, 2021).

A typical family size in Honduras ranges from 4 to 5 people per household, including the parents. They typically live in bahareque houses, houses built of adobe with dirt floors, with around 2 rooms. Another type of house that is hurricane proof includes cement floors, steel-reinforced walls, and iron roof and doors. These more protected houses have been built by the efforts of volunteer programs such as Habitat for Humanity in the Honduran city of La Ceiba. (Morris Habitat for Humanity, 2024). Poverty in Honduras has strained families and made acquiring food more difficult. According to IANAS, “72% of rural households obtain their livelihood from subsistence farming on small parcels.” Most families also have pigs and chickens and go fishing for their food. A typical family diet consists of rice and beans, corn, seafood, and tortillas. A very popular Honduran drink is horchata, a cinnamon flavored grain based drink. Food in Honduras is typically prepared on a clay or cast iron griddle called a comal or in an oven. (World Food Program USA, 2024).

The majority of jobs in Honduras are agricultural, most consisting of physical labor on farms. Many families live off of the income from these farms and heavily depend on agriculture. The average wage is about 2,750 USD annually, one of the lowest averages of Central America. Enrollment in primary schooling is accessible now, but higher levels of education are limited and rarely pursued. Only 30% of Honduran children attend high school and free education past sixth grade is not offered by the Honduran government. It is common for children to be forced to leave school early in order to work and help support their families and 80% of Hondurans do not have access to quality healthcare. Three fourths of the country has access to electricity, the majority have access to telephones and internet, many take buses as transportation and roads and local markets can be accessed in urban towns. (Americares, 2024).

Earning a living is difficult and many families suffer from extreme poverty. Even with the younger family members leaving school to help support their families, making ends meet is difficult with such low wages. Around 60% of the population lives in poverty (USAID, 2019). Gaining access to

nutritious food is made extremely difficult for impoverished families, causing food scarcity in the country. This leads to malnutrition, which can be defined as the lack of proper nutrition from not having enough to eat, and is a very severe challenge that 48% of the rural population in Honduras faces (The Borgen Project, 2015). Malnutrition has many causes in Honduras, most notably poverty, water insecurity, and climate changes.

Of the 60% of the Honduran population living in poverty, approximately 23% of children under five years old experience stunting from lack of necessary nutrients necessary for growth during primary years of development. 10% of infants born in Honduras are born underweight and half of the children born in the more impoverished areas suffer from stunted growth. Unfortunately, a large number of Honduran children also suffer from anemia, a health condition in which the blood lacks enough red blood cells to carry oxygen through the body. This is largely due to malnutrition at such a young age leading to iron deficiencies, the most common cause of anemia. 50% of children between the ages 2 and 6 suffer from anemia, and they are unable to fight the condition without the proper nutrition (The Borgen Project, 2015).

Additionally, lack of water can worsen anemia since dehydration can cause red blood cells to shrink and reduce necessary hemoglobin. (National Library of Medicine, 2018). Water scarcity is another facet of food insecurity that Honduras faces, causing issues like the aforementioned health condition of anemia. Clean water in Honduras is not very accessible, and around 81% of rural households lack access to a clean water supply (Planet Water Foundation, 2023). By the end of the century, water availability in Honduras is expected to drop 40%. This inaccessibility not only worsens anemic conditions, but amplifies the negative effects of malnutrition and can increase fatigue and dizziness (The Borgen Project, 2024).

Severe climate changes and drought have been a large contributing factor to water scarcity and food insecurity. Climate change has been one of the leading causes of water scarcity in Honduras, leading to severe droughts and weather conditions that negatively affect crops. Hondurans both feed off of and work on their agricultural lands, making their farms extremely important to both their economy and food supply. When their crops are endangered, it causes a great threat to Honduran people. Climate change has caused El Niño, a weather phenomenon in which water temperatures rise in the Eastern Pacific and near the equator, to become even warmer than usual, causing intense drought periods. El Niño is typically hard on crops, including Honduras', so it is particularly harmful when these conditions are intensified. These droughts have very negatively impacted agricultural land and many crops are suffering. Intensified El Niño conditions have led 1.6 million Hondurans to require food assistance from the loss of crops (The Borgen Project, 2023). Climate change also intensified the effects of other natural disasters, such as flooding and hurricanes.

First and foremost, in order for a country to be able to solve any issue, they need to be healthy. Without safety and health, nothing can get done. If the population is dehydrated, they are unable to solve the issue of malnutrition, making the underlying problem water scarcity. In order to solve water scarcity, I suggest putting in place infrastructure that provides clean drinking water to the population. This relies on the government entirely. They could implement wells, sewage, water treatment plants, and distribution systems. It is up to the government officials of Honduras to ensure that their citizens are healthy. For 81%

of rural households to not have access to healthy drinking water is unacceptable and no way to live. Before the issue of malnutrition can be tackled, Hondurans need water.

The Honduran people need a way to access food in addition to water. Luckily, there are programs set in place making an effort to help provide safe drinking water and food aid to Honduran families. The World Food Program is led by the Honduras School Meals Program and has provided over one million children with food assistance. They provide meals in schools, both encouraging school attendance and feeding poor communities. Also from The World Food Program, Purchase for Progress is helping support the agricultural community and has bought \$60 million worth of food from small Honduran farms. Food for the Poor began after Hurricane Mitch in 1999 and has been building schools for education past primary school, distributed food throughout communities, shipped medicines around the country, and built secure homes for Hondurans. These programs show the efforts being made and have been extremely helpful in alleviating the stress of malnutrition. However, the weakness of programs that depend on funding is that they are unable to solve such a wide scale problem. It would be impossible to maintain the constant donations and efforts it would take to keep up these programs forever. This is the reason the solution has to begin at the root within the education of the country.

The most helpful solution to any population suffering from poverty is to educate. From teaching proper agricultural methods to making higher education more accessible, knowledge has the power to help impoverished Hondurans. If they are offered a higher education, it could be possible for Hondurans to earn a living with higher paying careers. Moreover, necessary life skills such as proper agricultural techniques should be included in the curriculum. Even education for those that prefer to stay in the workforce and on farms (learning proper food production methods, how to properly care for crops, and even nutritional knowledge) could be of great benefit to Hondurans and help combat poverty and malnutrition. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has put in place a humanitarian funding project that will support Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador by educating them. They are helping farmers adapt to the conditions of El Niño by teaching them to grow plants that require less water, like the dragon fruit cactus and sorghum plant. Programs like these grow to become self-sufficient as they provide aid while teaching the people how to provide for themselves once back on their feet. It is also extremely beneficial for those in better situations to help how they can. Plenty of programs such as Feed the Future, Americares, USAID, and more are making an effort to help those in need. When Hondurans are unable to provide for themselves, it is important that those that have the means to donate their money and time do so until they can.

Since Honduras is so dependent on its agriculture, it is important to protect Honduran farms and find a way to make them able to withstand severe weather changes that often harm the crops. I propose a program similar to USAID's humanitarian fund that will teach Honduran farmers how to make their crops resilient to climate changes. It would take from USAID's idea of implementing the growth of plants that require less water in addition to taking ideas from other countries' successful agricultural methods. For example, China provides over half of the world's vegetables and has achieved a 95% self-sufficiency rate. They grow their crops in regions with the best conditions and have installed water irrigation systems (CSIS, 2017). Systems like these would benefit areas of Honduras that suffer from drought and El Niño. Teaching farmers how to implement these methods would help Hondurans fighting food scarcity and hopefully alleviate anemia rates, as well. The difficulties of starting a successful educational program is

finding teachers and the means to educate such a broad population. I would suggest having professional agriculture instructors either volunteer or be paid a reasonable wage for a few months of teaching. Once a community is taught how to properly maintain their farms, the goal is that the knowledge will spread as they teach their own children and neighboring communities. Funding would have to be provided from a non-profit or even the United Nations. This is not a quick solution and it will take years to fully implement and start to see progress. However, the best, most assured solutions offer a long-term remedy instead of a quick fix, even if it takes more time. If a program like this is successful, it could solve food scarcity in Honduras and assist many Hondurans suffering from the effects, including the countless children dealing with anemia and stunted growth and the millions who do not know where their next meal will come from.

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