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Public Health Issues Concerning Belize: How can you help?

Public health issues concerning Belize have been extremely predominant throughout the country, specifically in low-resourced areas. According to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), one of the most critical issues is maternal health infant mortality in Belize decreased from 21.2 to 12.26 deaths per 1000 live births between 2000 and 2021. This has decreased infant mortality by 42.2% overall. Even though these statistics show improvement in preventing or reducing the likelihood of death at birth; they still demand the immediate attention of the international community to take action. Therefore, I have proposed solutions that may help us achieve a better public health system in Belize. These include proper sanitation in schools, sexual education for young people, and access to healthcare services that public donations, cash transfers, and non-government organizations can sustain.

Many of these problems are caused by poverty in Belize. According to the World Bank, about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population in Belize lives in multidimensional poverty as of 2021. What is multidimensional poverty? Multidimensional poverty consists of an index that measures the percentage of households in a country that do not contain the following monetary poverty, education, and basic infrastructure service. This index helps analyze data and capture a more specific and complete picture of poverty.

First, let's define the meaning of public health issues and how they currently affect Belize. Public health issues are problems that affect the health, well-being, and quality of life of populations or communities. Many communities, including small towns, don't possess high levels of education on maintaining proper hygiene. Therefore, diseases tend to spread, killing large populations at once. In Belize, the population has suffered from environmental issues, such as not having access to clean water, sanitation, and proper waste management. UNICEF reports that "Access to clean drinking water is challenging in many parts of Belize, particularly in rural areas and the south side of Belize City. Over 20 percent of schools report an unreliable water supply and 25 percent have untreated water for their students and staff" (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (W.A.S.H), UNICEF). Therefore this issue causes many of the students to drink polluted water, which can lead to sickness, diseases, and death. Also, soap, toilet paper, and basic cleaning materials are not provided to these schools, affecting the proper sanitation that must be maintained to decrease the amount of disease spread. Another concerning issue is access to maternal care. As seen above, infant mortality has decreased, yet the statistics shown are still very high due to mothers not having access to proper prenatal care. Mothers should have access to healthcare systems that will provide their children with a sustainable and healthy environment before, during, and after pregnancy. This includes monthly doctor visits and sanitized labor rooms with all the correct functioning equipment.

It is also important to note that Belize's economy is based on agriculture tourism, offshore banking, and energy sources. Agriculture has been the biggest and most significant contributor, with products like sugar, citrus fruits, and bananas, playing a crucial role in maintaining a stable economy. Tourism is another major sector due to Belize's beautiful beaches and tourist attractions. To some limit, Belize also

exports crude oil. In 2022, Belize had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.5 billion, and a per capita GDP of \$6,049. Belize has access to member markets and benefits from the trade agreements established through this economic union. It also has an export-oriented economy that benefits from its proximity to the large markets of the U.S. and Mexico. Even though this portrays a good economy, Belize still struggles to decrease its poverty rates. Limited female participation in the labor force hinders efforts to reduce poverty and creates a constrained labor market. Women and Mayans are disproportionately self-employed and impoverished, suggesting a structural disparity in employment and poverty levels. Belize's economy had a strong economic setback due to an increase in tourism and related constructions. By 2022, the real GDP per person had exceeded pre-pandemic levels. In 2021, the GDP grew by 15.2%, followed by an estimated 9.6% in 2023. Despite restructuring external debt in 2021 and making significant fiscal adjustments, the public debt remains high at 72.8% of GDP in 2022. The unemployment rate dropped a significant 5%, yet, many people are not participating in their labor force. To provide a solution for these problems, the government should focus on maintaining fiscal discipline, implementing reforms to boost growth, addressing climate change impacts, and supporting vulnerable groups. This is the main reason why addressing poverty in Belize requires comprehensive strategies that not only focus on income levels but also on improving access to education, healthcare, clean water, and other essential services that will not depend on the government or government-funded organizations.

Another main public health issue seen in Belize has been the lack of access to safe water throughout schools. According to UNICEF, "only 30 percent of Belize's schools meet the internationally accepted standard of one toilet per 25 girls; only 33 percent meet the standard for boys of 50 boys per toilet. Only 13 percent of our schools provide bathroom access to children with physical disabilities." Therefore with these statistics, we can conclude that many young girls and boys suffer in these conditions due to the unsanitary environment. Yet, its effects are more prevalent in women and young girls. UNICEF conducted the first Menstrual Health Management study in Belize where a report shows that gender inequality and discriminatory social norms lack basic services that often affect girls' and women's menstrual hygiene, specifically for those who live in rural communities. This indicates that many schools lack adequate water supply and need more bathroom facilities, along with hygiene awareness and sensitivity training in schools to avoid bullying, embarrassment, and harassment in these environments.

While discussing public health issues in Belize, it is important to acknowledge that the statistics we often see are not just numbers. They represent families and individuals who are struggling to meet their basic needs. The story of a young girl Maria portrays what poverty is like for young girls in Belize. A 7-year-old orphan, who lost her parents, needed to take care of her younger siblings. At that age, no one is emotionally or physically prepared to take care of one's siblings. These challenges lead to malnutrition, dehydration, and diseases. She lived in the streets with no access to food or water. Thankfully, many organizations such as iServants have established Feed-A-Child centers around the villages, allowing the brain to feed these young children and give them access to clean water. This act of kindness transformed their lives; it shows how something so little can be so significant.

Organizations such as iServant have been trying to fix public health issues apart from feeding children. They also contain medical services for these young vulnerable kids like Maria. Therefore offering proper healthcare these children need in their lives. Apart from healthcare services, they construct schools in remote areas providing safe and sanitary conditions in these schools, therefore giving students access to

clean water and proper hygiene practices. Many of these organizations like iServants also need our help as a community to volunteer, donate, or financially support these organizations to help more children like Maria.

Even though these organizations have provided solutions, we must go to the root of the problem. Therefore one of the most important solutions must be to improve the infrastructure of the schools. Therefore educating both young boys and girls of the age of 11 about the menstrual cycle and its normality. This can be done in various ways including using educational videos that teach what menstruation is and the basic hygiene for girls to keep themselves and those around them safe. Another solution must be to increase the capacity of the bathrooms. This can be done by non-profit organizations that are willing to donate toilets and new structures for the bathrooms in these schools. Finally, donating tampons, pads, soap, and toilet paper can improve the hygiene these young ladies have. These may be obtained by donations made by starting invitations and groups around Belize that are not government-funded. This includes private school organizations that are willing to donate monthly supplies to these schools as well as the community around them that is also willing to help. It is also important to educate students on sexual reproduction to bring awareness towards STD transmissions and practice safe sex to avoid these transmissions as well as unwanted pregnancies. Presentations that inform young students about the consequences of sexual intercourse are an effective way of teaching these young learners. Therefore bringing speakers who can educate these children about the dangers of STD transmission and how they can be prevented. This will help reduce teen pregnancies as well as reduce the amount of STD transmission therefore creating a safer environment for everyone!

Another issue is access to clean water; this has been a problem not only faced by countries such as Belize but has been seen around the globe. In Belize, access to clean water can be challenging in certain areas like the rural remote regions. A day in the life of a low-income Belizean living in rural areas; when trying to get water it consists of them needing to implement water treatments to clean their water sources such as filtering and boiling water. Therefore, their journey to be able to drink water is extremely long and difficult. One idea that would be difficult to obtain yet achievable is to create clean well systems and water treatment facilities throughout these regions. Many communities and people will be willing to donate supplies needed for these construction projects, and starting non-profit organizations can help collect donations that will be given straight to these villages.

All of these problems are equally important and need our immediate attention. These problems have affected kids as young as 3 to teens of the age of 15 and elders of 60. Many of the diseases that have been passed through polluted water include cholera, which is an infectious bacteria that causes severe diarrhea and dehydration. Typhoid fever is another one of the diseases that is passed through this contaminating water, causing fever, headache, and diarrhea.

An important and efficient solution for diseases such as Typhoid Fever is providing villages with vaccination centers, so therefore people can get vaccinated and avoid these diseases. It is important to vaccinate all populations, including those in rural areas. Everyone should have the opportunity to get vaccinated. Contacting local hospitals and asking them to vaccinate these people can be funded by either cash transfers, non-government organizations, or public donations that are willing to help these people by giving them the same opportunities everyone deserves.

Cash transfer may also be a solution to clean water by providing Belize with financial resources for individuals and communities. These can help with the infrastructure development since cash transfers can be used to fund these constructions/improvement of water supply. Such as wells and water treatment facilities. These can also help to purchase treatment equipment like chlorine packets and filtration systems which will be able to improve the quality of drinking water and reduce the risk of waterborne diseases. Cash transfers will also be able to fund education and awareness campaigns that can be held in different villages throughout Belize, therefore providing a more advanced education as to how to correctly water and why it is important to drink clean water. We can make this specific cash transfer and customize it to Belize's specific needs, therefore making the transfer more efficient. Cash transfer can play a valuable role in addressing public health issues by providing communities with financial resources and support.

While cash transfers may have positive results, they can also face challenges and setbacks, therefore not being 100% efficient. Limited funding may restrict the scope and impact of cash transfer programs, making it difficult for them to reach all communities in need of assistance. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of cash transfer programs is essential, as it relies on external funding sources that may not be available in the long run. An easy solution for these problems may be making contracts with organizations who will participate in these cash transfers therefore agreeing on how many years they will participate in the program. This will help maintain certainty that the cash transfers will be effective.

Also, cash transfers play an important role in these solutions because they allow organizations to use this money and provide the materials, tools, and equipment needed by these families. This makes it appropriate for communities in Belize because it allows one-to-one contact with the people in the country, therefore creating a relationship between the community and its organization. This causes a positive effect in being able to help people almost immediately, without needing to let other organizations, such as the government, control what can and can not be done with this money.

Another thing to think about is the fact that there may be a problem when it comes to using the money or getting the money to Belize since the government might want to take part in the usage of the money. Therefore one quick solution is creating a nonprofit organization that will take in the money elsewhere, and buy the materials needed to build schools, water treatment facilities, or necessary resources that can be provided to these different institutions. By doing this, we ensure that there is 100% efficiency as to where the money is going, the people, students, and families around Belize, instead of the funds ending up in the wrong hands affecting the entire community.

Finally, one of the most crucial aspects of solving these problems is education. Education is key for these solutions since they provide adequate easy access and participation of individuals who can volunteer to help. One of the main problems is the lack of education that these villages have therefore affecting young people to not know how to deal with the importance of their hygiene. Unicef has kindly proposed many videos that can be projected and shown to all these individuals creating a healthier and sustainable environment. With these innovative videos, students will have easy access to these tools and guides. Another idea that can also be used for schools and villages is to create posters on how to properly wash your hands, clean water, and have proper hygiene in general. These guides are easy to make and have little to no cost.

Hence, we can conclude that even though Belize is a beautiful country, all countries have their areas in which they need improvement and it is our job to help these countries and create better communities for them. The global community's response transcends national boundaries, demonstrating people's solidarity in the face of challenges. Donor countries and aid organizations can offer immediate relief in crises and also catalyze lasting changes by investing in infrastructure and policies that promote food security. The stories of little girls like Maria are just one of the many that we can change. We have the tools, the ideas, and the opportunity to initiate these wonderful well-thought-out organizations that one day will be able to change the world and help create a better Public Health system around the Globe!

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