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British Virgin Islands, Policy and Governance

Research Can Save Lives In The British Virgin Islands

The British Virgin Islands are British overseas territories made up of around 60 islands. Of these islands, 16 are inhabited. The main islands are Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke. For reference, these Caribbean islands are 0.9 times the size of Washington, D.C.. The islands have a subtropical, humid climate, with temperatures regulated by trade winds. Of the 40,102 people currently residing in the islands, 50.3% of them live in rural areas. 46.7% of the land is currently cultivated. The island's major crops include lots of fruits and vegetables, and seafood from the surrounding Caribbean Sea. Because the Islands are territories, they have a limited self government, with a parliamentary democracy much like their British counterparts. (Our Islands | Government of the Virgin Islands)

The British Virgin Islands are located in the northeastern area of the Greater Antilles, with Puerto Rico lying to the west. Twenty of the sixty islands are uninhabited. Some of the lesser islands include Great Tobago, SaltPeter, Cooper, Norman, Guana, Beef, Great Thatch, Little Thatch, and Marina Day. The chief town of the islands is Road Town, located on Tortola Island. The population of this island is 28,054 (2010). This amounts to approximately seventy percent of the entire population of the islands. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

The British Virgin Islands are very much tropical. They contain many lagoons, as well as many barrier beaches. Coral reefs surround the islands, especially the northernmost islands. Puerto Rico, to the west, is a result of a central fault - block mountains. These mountains extend into the British Virgin Islands, causing many low, rolling hills and mountains on the islands. The highest point on the islands is on Tortola Island. Mount Sage is 1,709 feet above sea level. The lowest point is Anegada Island. Anegada Island is the northernmost island, and is never above more than ten to fifteen feet above sea level. Earthquakes are occasional, and hurricanes are extremely rare. There are no rivers on any of the islands. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

Because of the subtropical climate, the temperatures on the islands average at 78 degrees fahrenheit. The humidity is consistently low, due to scarce rainfall. Rainfall averages to approximately fifty inches per year, however most of it becomes runoff. This causes most of this water to go on unused. Only Road Town has a piped water system. The rest of the islands rely on wells and cisterns. Due to increasing demand, and lessening supply, the islands have resorted to importing water on barges. Also, as a result of this, plants and trees are not very dense. Animals such as small birds and game such as deer are prevalent; bigger animals aren’t very well suited to the climate or the current state of the islands. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

Agriculture was the biggest industry in the islands up until the 1970’s. Tourism then took over. Since then most farms have become subsistence farms, in which most families part time fish as well. Livestock has become an important part of the industry in recent years. The main crops grown on the islands include bananas, sugar cane, citrus fruits, coconuts, and mangoes. Sometimes these crops are exported, but most of the time the crops are locally grown, sold, and consumed. Fresh seafood, however, is becoming a more popular export as time goes on. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

The British Virgin Islands are not particularly known for their manufacturing. This industry is not very big on the islands; rum, paint, and building materials such as gravel and sand are the only things produced. Roads and transportation aren't the best either. Tortola has two main highways; Virgin Gorda,

Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke also have road systems. The other 56 islands do not. There are two airports; Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport on Beef Island, and a small one on Anegada Island. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

The average household in the British Virgin Islands holds a multigenerational family dynamic. Each generation averages 2.33 children per family. Tourism is the biggest source of income for the islands. Other incomes include finance businesses, and seafood exports. The average hourly wage for middle class families is $10.38. Most families shop at large grocery stores or local markets. Their diet consists of processed foods, as well as lots of carbohydrates with food like rice, beans, and fried dough/bread in high supply. Their most nutritious food source is fresh seafood. They have access to modern appliances, and electricity is accessible through mainly solar energy. Public education is free, and mostly accessible. The only thing making education less accessible is unsafe roads due to the weather in the Caribbean, (Virgin Islands 2010 Population and Housing Census Report). Healthcare is not free, and is mostly covered by private insurance. There is only one public hospital that offers no specialist care on the islands. The leading causes of death are chronic and cardiovascular disease, which both require specialist care. In order to receive this care, islanders have to travel to another nearby country with better healthcare. (What Is Healthcare like in British Virgin Islands? Health and Medical Information | - CountryReports)

The British Virgin Islands has many issues, among them is inadequate healthcare, unsafe roads due to weather, and unhealthy diets, leading to cardiovascular diseases. The island's biggest problem, however, is a lack of data and research or outdated information on the islands. For example, we know that there is only one hospital on the island, and that there are no specialty doctors to treat chronic diseases like cancer and HIV, or cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. (“Chronic Disease the Leading Cause of Deaths in the BVI”) We know the other 15 islands have a disadvantage getting to the hospital when necessary, and that it affects everyone on the island. However, we don't know how many people have died from each disease, or how many people have died or been seriously injured because their access to healthcare was delayed. There is no data on how many patients the hospital treats every year, or any records of any efforts to help this issue. We also know that, because of unhealthy diets, diseases like diabetes, or even diseases like cancer are prevalent, however, we don't know how much of the food in stores is fresh versus processed, or where the islanders get most of their food. We don't know if schools are serving fresh, healthy food, or if there have been any efforts to increase access to fresh foods. Without data or proper knowledge of these issues, nothing can be done to improve the situation.

To bring awareness to issues in the islands, university extension services can be helpful. In my hometown area the University of Minnesota Morris is working with the community of Barrett, Mn, through a university extension program. High School students at my school collect pricing information from local grocery stores in our community, and give this information to the university. In four years when this information is fully collected, the university will have access to pricing trends in our area, and they can help to improve food insecurity issues caused by prices from there. The islands are small, and no one knows what the communities on the islands need more than the communities themselves. There are two universities on the islands; H. Lavity Stoutt Community College and University of the West Indies. These universities can partner with each other, and community members to establish what they want to change in their community.

The University of Virgin Islands in the U.S. Virgin Islands has implemented this strategy into their community, and they saw some promising results. In 2021, the university did a poll, and on average, a majority of teens that took the poll pledged to eat healthier. Continuing the trend of focusing on the younger generation, they were able to create 1,211 jobs in 2021. (“Center for Marine and Environmental Studies (CMES)”) Being that the U.S. Virgin Islands and the British Virgin Islands are very similar, I think it's reasonable to say that a university extension service could also be successful in the British Virgin Islands.

Possible funding needs depend on what the community chooses to collect data about. For example if they choose to focus on prices of fresh fruits and vegetables in stores and markets, transportation costs would need to be covered for traveling to all of the stores and markets. To cover these costs, the universities can apply for a grant through the British Virgin Island's government. The grants are "To provide funding for residents within the Territory on projects that are beneficial to the Virgin Islands."(*Grants | Government of the Virgin Islands*, n.d.) This approach allows small communities to have their voice heard, as well as ensuring that other, larger countries are made aware of problems in the islands. Some data may be difficult to collect, for example, hospitals might not give away data on how many patients have certain diseases due to patient confidentiality. Data collected could also pertain to cultural norms on the islands, and the utmost respect for these norms would need to be maintained. The data itself is not an immediate solution, and it won't solve every problem on the islands. However, it is a starting point for the communities.

The British Virgin Islands has some advantages over other countries who might want to try this strategy. The fact that there are only two universities means that there are only two places the data might be, and because the islands are small, it will be easier to compile. This ensures that data is easy to get, and that the public has a stake in it. This means that the data will be unbiased and intentional. The community being involved also means that things will actually get done, and they can use the data to help how they think it can be the most useful. This information being public is also important for awareness. If the data is public, other countries can see it, and then they have something to work off of if they decide to help. For example, how could the U.S. know to send Haiti hurricane safe homes and buildings if they weren't made aware of the data; that hurricanes were damaging infrastructure and therefore damaging food security. Or how could we know to add ventilation to grain storage bins in Mali if we weren't made aware of the waste unventilated bins were causing. The information and data being collected through a public university is super important to this strategy. Making this information public could save lives.

The British Virgin Islands are largely overlooked by the rest of the world due to the lack of data provided to the rest of the world. The islands have many issues relating to healthcare and food. The island's leading causes of death are chronic diseases and cardiovascular diseases like diabetes or strokes. These cardiovascular diseases are caused by a lack of heart healthy foods in people's daily diet. There is only one general hospital on the island, with no specialist care, meaning people often have to travel off the islands to get care. These are widespread issues that affect everyone on the islands. However, there is not enough information or data to suggest a specific solution to these problems. My hope is that in the next couple of years, someone will come to the World Food Prize and present a solution to a specific problem in the British Virgin Islands, due to the data then available to them.

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