

Jessica Pekach
W.B Saul High School
Philadelphia, PA
Guatemala, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Malnutrition in Guatemala

Guatemala is the largest economy in Central America with agriculture employing over half of the population. However, there are many factors which contribute to the fall of the economy such as the production of crops and the challenge to keep up with the practice of agriculture. Climate change, natural disasters and the lack of education are hurting subsistence farm families. Guatemala has the highest rate of malnutrition in the Western hemisphere, especially in the rural Mayan community which can be 80 percent or higher. The people become stunted because as they grow up they do not receive the nutrients and foods that they require to help develop their body. Luke Armstrong, a doctor in Guatemala said “Chronic malnutrition is dangerous in a child's first thousand days of their life because at this time they should be receiving protein, minerals and vitamins which help with brain and bone develop”. Malnutrition also has an effect on mental development, it can cause a lower IQ and a weaker immune system which can cause the children to become more prone to diseases, (Amanpour, n.d.). Improving nutrition can reduce disease and death because the people will have a better immune system (World Bank, n.d).

The average family consists of 6 members which include a mother, father and children who are most likely at risk for growing up in an environment where there is not a lot of food supply to go around for the entire family and there is not enough money to provide the basic things that a child should receive as they grow up (Esri, 2016). Data from a 2008-2009 survey showed that when there are one or two children in the family they are better nourished and less likely to become one of the many children in Guatemala that develop the deadly or long term effects of malnourishment (Timyan, 2011). Almost half of the children under five years of age will have a prevalence of stunting while most children in the United States will grow up knowing that they will have a secure meal to sit down to with their families. Guatemalans do not have that; the parents know that when they bring their children into the world they cannot always provide a stable environment. A study was done and it showed that when the amount of pregnancies decreased the health and welfare of families and the children increased (Timyan, 2011). If they could control pregnancies it would help lower the amount of children affected by malnutrition.

In Guatemala their meals are set up differently compared to the United States. The breakfast is very large, lunch is the main meal, then there is a middle of the day snack, and lastly there is dinner around 8:00 p.m. and this is smaller than their lunchtime meal. The typical diet of a Guatemalan consists largely of corn products such as corn tortillas which are consumed daily in the case that they can be afforded. They also consume tamales which are made from corn meal and either turkey or pork in a tomato sauce and wrapped in a banana leaf. Another meal that is popular is regional stews which usually contain some type of meat and they are on the spicy side (Travel experts, n.d.). Of course this view of the food in Guatemala sounds delicious but little does the world know that many families are living on less than a diet of tortillas, which is doing damage to the people inside and out. Little do people know that family farms cannot even provide food for themselves, they cannot grow crops because there may be drought or other natural disasters and the families cannot provide the eggs that their hens make to their children, instead they must sell them to gather up any amount of money that they can (The economist, 2009).

Smallholder farmers receive a small amount of land, at about 0.67 hectares which can contribute to one of the reasons why the amount of food produced is low (FAO.org, 2006). Farmers do not have a great variety of crops to choose from and if they fail or are destroyed then they will be left with nothing. Subsistence farm crops usually include corn, dry beans, rice and fruits and vegetables. However, many farmers do not practice efficient agricultural practices and have little knowledge of basic information such

as how to properly plant crops and how to protect, harvest and sell them afterwards. Families in rural areas are left with one or two meals that they can eat everyday but even if they do have some kind of food to eat it may not be the best food nutrient wise.

A contributing reason to why Guatemalans experience high rates of malnutrition is because a high percentage of people do not attend or complete school. Two million people between the ages of 15 and 24 do not attend school. School sizes are shrinking and so are the children that should be in school (UNICEF, 2016). Half of the people in Guatemala are below the poverty line and this creates a challenging environment for both the children and the parents. Children are forced to drop out of school because they must work to help support their family or their parents may not be able to afford the supplies, uniform or transportation for their children (Bartlett, n.d). Without completing school and learning the basic knowledge many children are left hopeless and helpless without the basic knowledge that can help them obtain a job to help improve their family's life. Improving malnutrition would improve school performance because children would actually be able to get through the day on a full stomach, receiving the correct nutrients and diet will cause better brain development and students would not be forced to drop out of school to go to work at a young age (World Bank, n.d).

The rural poor also has an inadequate amount of access to healthcare, with over 80 percent of doctors serving in Guatemala City. This creates a challenge for the people who live in the rural areas because they cannot be acquitted with the certain resources that they may need depending on their health. Even if they did need to travel to the city to see a doctor, most of the time they cannot because they may not have money to pay to travel to that location since it is further away. The government also plays a role in why many Guatemalans do not have enough access to health care. The government only spends about \$97 per person on public healthcare compared to the U.S, which spends about \$7825 per capita. This causes local health posts to have a low amount of workers and a low amount of supplies which creates a challenge for the people who have little to no money because they are forced to go to private clinics which are usually very pricey and out of their price range (Fieser, 2015). With Guatemala being the fourth highest for the malnutrition rate, access to health care must be an option to everyone throughout the country. Without it, children are becoming ill and with no help and no hope to recover from the symptoms of malnutrition time will just keep repeating itself (Wirtz, 2015).

Malnutrition is continuing to rise in Guatemala with 65 to 70 percent of children suffering and the percentage will continue to grow unless something is done. Guatemala is very rich in resources and the government can try to do more to help but currently one of the big problems that are affecting this factor is poverty which continues to strike at many families and while poverty is on the rise so is malnutrition. Families still struggle to gather whatever food that they can. Malnutrition continues to worsen in Guatemala as it inches its way up the list of countries affected by the devastating effects of malnutrition (Escobar, 2009).

Guatemalans make an unacceptable amount of money for the work that they complete, especially farmers who work to sell their crops and to provide food for their family. In 2012 there was an employment and wage controversy going on because the average Guatemalan family could not afford the basic living cost. The minimum wage was at a price of \$346 a month for agricultural and nonagricultural workers, while in the U.S we make that amount in one or two weeks. Another issue is coffee producers are hiring less seasonal workers due to the fact that a type of fungus eats away at the coffee leaves which reduce the number of coffee plants that need to be tended to (Reuters, 2015). They must try to fulfill the cost of living which has increased and that caused the minimum wage to decrease which leaves many families with food insecurity and inadequate amounts of nutrition which leads to malnutrition (Wirtz, 2015). The wage that they make to complete their job leads to a limited amount of money and a limited amount of food that they can purchase.

Natural disasters continue to play a role in why farmers are not able to keep enough food production for their family. These include an extended drought, hurricanes and landslides which damage the land, kill the crops and limit the amount of food resources that the family needs to survive on and make a living off of (Vargas, n.d). Drought is a big issue that occurs more than once and effects subsistence farmers a great deal. Farmers are often left with dry corridor and shrunken harvests which include bean and maize crops which are two of the main grown crops in this area. With farming being one of the major jobs in rural Guatemala, when these disasters strike the families are left with whatever they can manage.

Guatemala is facing a malnutrition crisis that must be fixed, so there must be action to their food security problem. As time goes on the effects will worsen and a solution will grow further away. Women must get involved more in society and gender issues must be solved. One way that women can get involved is they can start their own vegetable gardens which will provide food for the family, as well as teach women how to properly provide and prepare food for their children (Robyn Fieser, 2015). Social businesses allow women to invest in services and products that will benefit their families such as water filters to provide clean water and improved stoves so that they can cook nutrient efficient food for their family. A local project in Guatemala started by a company called Wakami sells bracelets, necklaces and umbrellas which are sold in international markets. The money that is obtained from the products goes towards women involvement and education for children. This project has shown improvement and the high school attendance rate has doubled (Bauer, 2016).

Another clear task that must be discussed is poverty that affects many family farms. There must be more jobs including for women and the average wage must increase so that families can have enough on which to live. An organization called Feed the Future teaches farmers how to better cultivate their land so they have many harvests to come. Farmers are also taught the importance of growing nutrient rich food, maintain healthy livestock and how to properly plant. The goal of this program is to teach farmers that they do not have to always rely on food aid but instead they can exercise their independence (Egan, 2016).

Education is a problem that must be addressed because without education the new generations will continue to go in a recurring cycle of malnutrition. Education should be free or given at a lower cost so that more children can go to school and complete it. I believe that the government should make sure that every child successfully completes school, education should be enforced. Since many families are often challenged with providing their children with food, schools should also provide the children with a breakfast and lunch and these meals should include the nutrients that will reduce stunting and malnutrition. Guatemalans are falling behind in education and that is lowering the chances of the children to succeed in life and get a good paying job. Also, education is low in Guatemalan women and when they have children later in life they are uninformed on how to properly take care of their children and when to feed the children the proper nutrients that will stop stunting from happening (Jocotan, 2009).

As the population of Guatemala increases the number of children that are affected by malnutrition and stunting increases which can ultimately lead to decreases in the number of children that actually make it throughout their life. Guatemala is an agriculturally rich country but as you make it to the countryside you begin to see the effects of poverty on the people. With 80 percent of the children that live on the countryside suffering from extreme malnourishment, many of who live on farms are prone to sell their vegetation than to provide them to their family. With farmers living on approximately \$4.00 a day it is impossible to gather enough money for everything that they need to provide for an average family size of 6 people (Heinrich, 2017). Wages must increase, job selection must increase, and food production must increase. There has to be change and that can only start if there is action taken into the matter.

First there must be nutrients provided to children at a young age and this includes educating mothers on when and which nutrients must be provided to the child so that later in life they do not have to deal with

the risks. UNICEF aims to improve the nutrition of children between the ages of 6 months to 3 years by providing “sprinkles”. The packets of sprinkles contain a blend of micronutrients which can be added to any food (Heinrich, 2017). Then education must be provided for free or a low cost for families and women that suffer from poverty and because without education there is a little chance of succeeding in life. Farmers can be educated on how to plant, keep a fertile ground and how to also sell their vegetation as well as provide for their family. Change starts with help from the community, the government and surrounding countries such as the U.S. As support grows so will the faith and spirits of Guatemalans, mothers will know that their children can grow up in an environment where they will not have to worry about what the next meal is and if they can grow up to reach their full potential. Farmers will know that they can actually eat the crops that they grow and that they will always have the option to have something on their table. Lives all together will improve, communities will join together, education will become a priority and malnutrition will be no more.

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