

Greg Sibbel, Student Participant  
Kuemper Catholic High School, Iowa

## South Africa Malnutrition The Changes of Urbanization

World malnutrition is usually characterized by gaunt, famine stricken children in the poverty and turmoil of Africa. Six million of these children die each year. As of 2004, 1.1 billion people in the world were hungry or underfed, but another billion of the world's citizens are overweight or obese as well. Obesity is becoming an epidemic over the entirety of the planet, not just in the industrialized parts of it. In South Africa, overnutrition was unheard of a century ago, but now one in three men and one in two women are overweight or obese (Burslem). In fact, undernutrition and obesity often reside in the very same household. Customary diets that consisted of simple meals of grain, legumes, fruits, and vegetables rich in complex carbohydrates and nutrients are being abandoned for fatty, nutrient empty foods as developing countries such as South Africa are being industrialized, and the population shifts from rural to urban. Time has also revealed that heart disease, diabetes, and "civilized country" diseases are on the rise. This growing problem can be reversed through proper dietary education and a more concerned worldwide society.

As South Africa becomes more industrial and Westernized, the figures of the inhabitants of this country also have been changing. It was once and still is a country burdened with undernutrition of the poor and the children, but now South Africa is also facing a growing rise in overweight and obese people, especially the adults. It is not the only country taking this course however. All around the world, in Kuwait, Colombia, the Philippines, and China, obesity affects 25 to 50% of the population. "Even in the low-income, Sub-Saharan African countries with HIV and malnutrition dominating, there are still 10 to 15 percent of adults that are overweight," says Barry Popkin, professor at the Nutrition School of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Burslem). In 1998, the South Africa Demographic and Health Survey recorded that 29% of men and 56% of women were overweight, along with 9% of men and 29% of women who were obese (Burslem). This rise is exacerbated by an increase in energy-dense high-calorie diets, high in fat and sugars, with a Western-style work and social infrastructures (Burslem).

The group in South Africa that is most affected by malnutrition and the shift from rural to urban are the native Africans. The other groups in the country are the white, Indian, and colored people. South Africa has been divided among the races since the day Portuguese explorers landed on the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. Racism has thrived through the centuries of slavery, white domination, and then through apartheid that officially, by law, separated the people of the country into four groups. Although native Africans were always the vast majority of the population, they held almost no political power till the end of apartheid led by Nelson Mandela and through international pressure. Now the African National Congress, the party that Mandela led, has the majority and is in power (O'Meara).

Even though blacks now have all the same rights as whites and coloreds, the economic and social inequalities remain. In 1993, blacks composed the vast majority of the population at 76%, but they controlled only 29% of the country's total income. Whites, on the other hand, made up only 13% of the population, but earned 58% of the total income. Colored and Asian people make up the rest at 8% and 3% of the population, and 7% and 5% of the income (O'Meara). This huge gap between percent of population and the percent of income earned has to be equalized if South Africa is to become a stabilized country. The income gap is one of the root causes of the malnutrition in poor urban and rural blacks. The education, housing, and basic

needs of this large part of the country is egregiously substandard when compared to the mansions of the upper class whites who live just across town from the run down ghettos of the poor native Africans.

The “typical” family in South Africa is black and consists of two parents and three children, and having many unmet needs. Of the total population, 36.3% of children were aged between 0 and 6 years, 35.8% between 7 and 12 years, and 27.9% between 13 and 17 years. 56.7% of the population live in “non-urban” area, and 43.3% of the people and rising live in cities. The South African family needs a sturdy, stable, weather-proof house with all the basic necessities. However, in both the country and city, only 74.5% of the population lived in formal dwellings, and more households in urban, 79.8%, than non-urban, 66.4%, areas occupied formal dwellings. In rural areas, 26.2% of households live in traditional dwellings, while the number of homes in cities was only 1%. The family needs reliable jobs that pay enough to support and feed themselves. Of the people polled that were 15 to 65 years old, 39.5% are employed, while there is an unemployment rate of 12%. Plus 48.5% are not economically active or haven’t looked for a job in the last four weeks. These poor African families also need an education to lift them out of destitution and back on their feet. 10.6% has no formal education, 18.9% have been to primary school, 45.7% have gone to secondary school, and 24.8% have a high education (Lehohla). This lack of basic education needs to be reversed in order for people to obtain good careers and make healthy dietary decisions. The poor also need health care in order to battle the epidemics of malaria, HIV, and other diseases that are sweeping the globe. In rural areas, the nearest nurse may be miles away, and doctor proximity is even worse. Essential information about epidemic diseases, both communicable and non-communicable, needs to be taught to the masses in order to stop the progression of illnesses and eventually eradicate them. The families need safe water sources and practices to prevent waterborne diseases and contamination. In urban areas, 98.6 % have access to safe, piped water. Rural areas also have a high percentage of access to clean water, 71.9% (Lehohla), but more can still be done to help all rural areas attain safe drinking water. And most importantly, the poor South African family, to obtain all these twenty-first century human necessities, require others with power and influence to recognize these needs and help the typical family in getting their needs met.

As South Africa develops and becomes more industrialized, a migration from rural areas to urban cities also occurs changing the lifestyles and therefore the diets of the emigrants as well. City jobs are less labor intensive so that the workers don’t burn as much energy in their day to day lives as their rural counterparts. High calorie and nutrient low foods are gaining popularity in the developing world, including South Africa (Burslem). More and more women are also being forced to find jobs to help support their families, still increasing the number of take-out versus home-cooked nutritious meals. Even in the rural farming areas, obesity is on the rise. Mechanization and the growing trend to a single, high-yielding cash crop limits physical activity and causes more unbalanced diets than when manual labor and multiple, family feeding crops were the norm.

A shift in macronutrient content is also evident when one looks at these changes in the South African diet. Over the past sixty years, urban black fat intakes have risen by 63%, while the carbohydrate intakes have gone down by 14%. This change has been taking place over the entire country, but has especially hit the city newcomers as they adjust from traditional meals based on grain, legumes, and vegetables to high sugar and fat of Western convenience foods. The traditional diet usually consists of about 60% of energy from carbohydrates and 25% of energy from fats. The Western diet on the other hand is around 50% carbohydrates and 35% fats. The amount of time spent in the city also seems to affect the amount of each food group that is consumed. The urbanites that spend 80 to 100% of their time in the city eat 4.1% less dairy,

3.3% more meat, and 14.5% less cereal than their rural counterparts who spend only 0 to 20% of their time inside developed areas. This might not seem like an important change, but they are “more dramatic than Western countries undergoing rapid industrialization over a longer period of time” (Bourne).

The culture of urban South Africa carries a part of the blame for the increasing obesity problem as well. Being overweight or obese is a sign of wealth, because money is associated with food consumption in many parts of South Africa. The larger the figures of the family are, the better the husband supports them and the more affluence they possess. The paranoid fear of HIV/AIDS is part of the problem as well. If someone is thin or dramatically loses weight, it may be rumored that the individual has contracted HIV and then developed AIDS (Lichtarowicz). This can lead to social and economic exclusion. This fear is very reasonable in a country where 5.3 million people live with AIDS (At a glance). Education of this disease is crucial to prevent further spread and infection. Superstition needs to be thrown out and science is to be put in to establish practices that we in the United States would consider common sense to prevent contraction of the disease.

National governments and international organizations can counteract the rapid acceleration of obesity in South Africa by educating the masses about proper dietary nutrition. They could sponsor primary school and media campaigns to promote the food groups and moderation in diets. Priority needs to be placed on eating a well balanced diet especially concentrating on teaching the distinctions between healthy and unhealthy foods. Many just do not understand the risks of being overweight or obese. The poor, semi-educated population might not understand how eating high-fat, high-calorie foods could lead to disease and even death. Media and fast food companies could be leaned on to decrease advertising and encourage healthy options such as salads and low-fat meals. Going from a Big-Mac to a Caesar Salad with Grilled Chicken lowers fat content by 24 grams and calories by 340, while increasing nutrient value. Physical activity and basic exercise also needs to be stressed in order to bring about a healthier society. Much promotion is being done in the U.S.A in the past couple of years, and I could see it accomplishing much in South Africa as well.

Hunger and obesity can be exterminated from the earth within years if a united worldwide effort was initiated. Poverty and hunger are linked at the most basic levels, and to correct one would greatly help the other as well. Wealthy, industrialized countries have the resources, both in short-term and long-term assistance, at their fingertips to substantially help poor developing countries. In the short-term, emergency drought and famine aid can help temporarily, but it doesn't have very much impact in the long run because the aid does not address any of the residual problems of the affected countries (Struble).

A large problem of developing countries is chronic indebtedness to industrialized countries. These long-term loans to the countries should be completely forgiven. For many developing, poor countries, a large portion of their income goes to paying interest on the development loans, even though many of these loans have low interest rates. These loans should be replaced by direct grants to free indebted countries from interest and repayment charges, and enable the countries to spend their finances where they are most needed. This summer, a huge step was accomplished when the G8 forgave 40 billion dollars worth of debt owed by eighteen of the poorest countries of the world. This lifted 1.5 to 2 billion dollars a year of debt repayment off the backs of many people, including 280 million Africans. More still needs to be done as this still affected only a small percentage of debt of third-world countries (Associated).

Agriculture, the backbone of many developing countries, needs to be revolutionized in order to sustain the poor of these nations. Modern seed varieties, machinery, land management techniques, and even the use of biotechnology would greatly improve the profitability and efficiency of poor farms around the world if the farming interests in needy nations are kept abreast of the latest plant and agricultural breakthroughs. Much of the problem is not in food production, but in food transportation and trade. Right now there is enough food in the world to feed all of its occupants, but we cannot get this food to many regions of the planet that need it the most. The on-going negotiations of the World Trade Organization have been lifting many of the disadvantages of third-world countries such as agriculture subsidies and import tariffs. But an equal playing field for all members of the WTO has yet to be established as differing factions disagree and even walk out of negotiations as they did in the fifth ministerial conference at Cancun.

The UN also needs to step up and play a larger role to help bring countries out of destitution. They need to put up a firm resolve to uphold human rights standards, stamp out ethnic cleansings and genocides that occur in wars such as the ones in Sudan and the Congo. Corruption and backroom deals, such as the Food-For-Oil fiasco, need to be thrown out and replaced by integrity and basic human compassion. The UN needs, in general, needs to be organized, resolute, and united in order to be a functioning international body. For once the infrastructure is cleared of obstacles, then economic growth, universal production, proper dietary practice, and improved health and medical services can follow.

Malnutrition is a growing problem all around the world. Whether it is in hunger or obesity, malnutrition is very harmful to its victims, leading to disease and even death. Diets are shifting as developing countries like South Africa become more Westernized and people are migrating from traditional farms to urban cities which encourages a more sedentary lifestyle where less time is devoted to labor intensive activities. This means that more fat, less dietary fiber, and fewer nutrients are producing an unbalanced and high energy diet leading to obesity. This trend to a more sedentary lifestyle that accounts for the rise of obesity can be changed through nutritional education and more healthy food options.

Hunger can also be obliterated through aid to poor countries to make them stable and self-sufficient. As debt is eased for developing nations, they can focus their resources on education, healthcare, and infrastructure to build the country. In order to sustain growing populations, agriculture is required to be brought up to date in order to increase sustainability of the crop and the land. Trade needs to be made fair for all, so that the food can get to those who lack it the most at a low cost. Impoverished countries also require world organizations such as the UN and other governing bodies to step up and give them a hand to get back on their feet. Malnutrition can be made a thing of the past, but only if the world cares enough to help.

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