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Food Security in Sudan

Food security is something that most people in the United States take for granted. We can rest assured knowing that we will always have something to eat. However, there are several regions around the world that cannot claim this luxury. Hunger, malnutrition, and famine are prevalent in many developing countries. Some estimates show that at this moment over 800 million people in the world are living with malnutrition, and as many as 300,000 children under the age of five die every year as a result of malnutrition. Despite science's progress in combating food insecurity, a staggering amount of people in the world simply does not have enough food to survive.

Lack of food security is an especially severe problem in sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately thirty percent of all people in this area suffer from malnutrition, and forty-seven percent live below the poverty line. Of the twenty-eight million people facing severe food shortages in the world, eighteen million reside in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, sub-Saharan Africa's problems do not end with poverty and hunger. The HIV/AIDS crisis, incessant warring, and an unpredictable climate add to the troubles of this region. The AIDS epidemic has killed about two million people and has left twelve million children orphaned in sub-Saharan Africa since 1980. Wars within the area kill another 200,000 people, mostly women and children, and displace millions of people from their homes. Droughts and floods can wipe out a full year's crop in no time. All these factors—HIV/AIDS, war, and climate—have a major effect on the food security of sub-Saharan Africa. HIV/AIDS kills many farmers every year, leaving millions of young children with nobody to provide for them. Wars not only kill thousands of people, but they also displace farming families from their homes, leaving their farms useless. An unexpected change in climate can ruin a crop and leave a family starving. These issues have created a sense of turmoil and have greatly limited the food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sudan is one sub-Saharan country in central Africa. With 2,376,000 square kilometers of land, it is the largest country by mass in all of Africa. It is home to over forty-one million people. The population is roughly fifty-two percent black, thirty-nine percent Arab, and nine percent from other ethnic background. Seventy percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, while twenty-five percent of the population practice indigenous beliefs, and five percent are Christian. Arabic is the official language of the nation, but eighteen other languages, as well as some six hundred dialects, are spoken within the country. Around eighty percent of the Sudanese labor force works in agriculture. However, only about .17 percent of Sudan's vast amount of land is used to grow permanent crops. Cotton, peanuts, sorghum, and millet are Sudan's major crops. The country's gross domestic product is an unimpressive 85.65 billion dollars, but it is growing at a rate of seven to eight percent per year. Agriculture accounts for thirty-nine percent of the country's gross domestic product. Sudan's gross domestic product per capita is a mere twenty-one hundred United States dollars. Sudan suffers an unemployment rate of almost nineteen percent, and forty percent of the nation's population lives in poverty. However, the discovery of large reserves of oil has helped the nation's economy greatly. Sudan is currently producing around 401,300 barrels of oil every day, out of which it exports 275,000 barrels. Thanks to oil production, Sudan experienced its first trade surplus in 1999.

Politically, Sudan is one of the most troubled countries in all of sub-Saharan Africa. Since gaining its independence from Great Britain and Egypt in 1956, the country has been in an almost constant state of turmoil. Civil wars have marred thirty-nine of Sudan's fifty years of independence. Violence has caused immense chaos in the nation, fostering severe malnutrition and a possibility of widespread famine in the future. The country is still recovering from a twenty-one-year civil war that ended in 2005 after killing two million people and displacing four million more. Since then, ongoing violence and genocide have displaced 1.9 million citizens and have in some way affected a total of 3.6 million. In the Darfur region of Sudan, government backed Arab militias, called Janjaweed, have been responsible for the deaths, rapes, forced servitude and slavery, and displacement of millions of non-Arab black citizens. Violence, disease, and malnutrition run rampant in refugee camps and other areas of the country, killing between 72,000 and 90,000 displaced persons in Sudan every year. Bacterial and protozoan diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever spread unchecked throughout the camps, affecting hundreds of thousands. Almost twenty percent of the population in southern Sudan, the country's poorest region, suffers from severe or acute malnutrition, defined as malnutrition that could cause death; fifteen percent prevalence is considered an emergency level, more than five points lower than the current Sudanese level. If the violence in Sudan persists, living conditions can only be expected to get worse.

Violence is not where Sudan's problems with food and nutrition security end. Only about fifteen percent of Sudan's 210 million acres of farmland is irrigated. The unavailability of water severely limits any further expansion of irrigation—the Nile River is virtually the only source of clean water in the country. Another major problem for Sudan is its lack of a potent infrastructure. Sudan has only 11,900 kilometers of roadways, of which only 4,320 are paved. It has a total of fifteen airports with paved runways, 5,978 kilometers of railways, and just one heliport. By contrast, the United States boasts 6,407,637 kilometers of roads, 4,164,964 kilometers of which are paved, 5,119 airports with paved runways, 226,605 kilometers of railways, and 149 heliports. For southern Sudan, things are even worse. Most of Sudan's infrastructure is located in the northeast part of the country. The few transportation systems located in the southern region are mostly of low quality. Sudan is also very susceptible to variables in rainfall. The rainy season varies by region but generally lasts from April through November. It is not uncommon, however, for the rainy season to be delayed or even completely absent during the year. Such an occurrence can leave the country in the midst of drought and inherent famine. On the other hand, if a rainy season brings too much water, ensuing floods can destroy crops and leave hundreds of thousands starving. Facing problems like these, a Sudanese subsistence farmer has little chance of success.

The predominant occupation of Sudan's population is subsistence farming. A classic subsistence farm ranges in size from less than an acre to about five acres. A typical subsistence farm is worked by one extended family, including a father, mother, children, and the elderly family members. The father is usually considered the head of the household. He runs the farm and makes sure crop production goes as well as possible. If the family produces enough food to trade and barter, it is his responsibility to go to the market. The mother is typically responsible for a few tasks in the field, as well as the preparation of food. When they aren't in school, which is often, children are put to work herding animals and retrieving water. The elderly help with the labor as much as they are able to, depending on their health. Most of the exceptionally strenuous labor is done communally, that is, several subsistence farms pool together to get the work done more quickly and easily. Subsistence farmers usually have a rather modest education—they show an adult literacy rate of only about sixty percent. The most common crops grown on Sudanese subsistence farms are millet, a whole grain related to barnyard grass, and sorghum, a grain native to the tropical regions of Africa. Peanuts and sesame are also grown, and some subsistence farms

rely on fishing for their food. Plowing, planting, and harvesting are done almost exclusively without machines. Human power and livestock are most often used to perform these tasks.

The life of a subsistence farmer in Sudan is anything but easy. The civil war forced almost all of the subsistence farmers, especially those in the South, away from their farms. Now that these farmers have returned and are trying to rebuild, they face many new challenges. Sudan's poor infrastructure prevents many farmers from trading their goods with other growers. Many women have been thrust into the position of head of the household due to the death of their husbands. These women find themselves particularly vulnerable to genocidal attacks, theft, and other injustices. Because of these and other problems, many people have begun moving away from subsistence farming. More and more Sudanese are beginning to work on large-scale farms or in industries such as oil production, cotton ginning, and textile manufacturing. Despite this migration, subsistence farming is still the most prevalent occupation in Sudan.

The greatest hindrance to food and nutrition security in Sudan is its government's domestic policy. The Sudanese government has adopted virtually no initiatives to provide lasting food security within its own country. Quite to the contrary, many of the government's policies tolerate, if not condone, the unspeakable violence and genocide that have become commonplace in this downtrodden nation. The government financially supports the Janjaweed militias in their genocidal killings of non-Arabs. Sudan has also been identified by the United Nations as a possible harbor for terrorists. Because of this, many nations have suggested imposing embargos upon this already poor nation, which would only worsen the problem of malnutrition in the country. In addition, the Sudanese government has done nothing to stop the loss of civilian life in this violent society. No domestic policy has been set up to put an end to the crisis that malnutrition is posing for Sudan's poorest people. Destitute citizens can do nothing but hope for a change in government policies or foreign intervention to improve their living conditions.

Where domestic policy has failed, international initiatives have been able to pick up the slack in many cases. A United States led coalition, after determining that genocide was, in fact, occurring in Sudan, sparked an effective intervention in 2001 to 2002. The United States, along with the United Kingdom, Kenya, Norway, Switzerland, and other nations, was largely responsible for bringing Sudan's civil war to end in 2005. Sudan's current cease-fire notwithstanding, the country is far from achieving a peaceful atmosphere. The United States and other foreign powers have attempted to stop the violence and genocide, but without the efforts of the Sudanese government, little can be done. Sudanese refugees have received an outpouring of support from the United States, as well as other foreign governments, especially from the citizens. American charities send millions of dollars to Sudan each year to provide food, shelter, and clothing to the millions of internally displaced persons. Once again, though, without the support of Sudan's own government, enough supplies can never be provided.

The United States recently set down four main initiatives to serve as our foreign policy in Sudan. Our first goal is a cease-fire and humanitarian access to the Nuba Mountains area. Secondly, we hope to establish zones and periods of tranquility for humanitarian access. Next, we will strive for the introduction of an international commission to investigate slavery, abductions, and forced servitude. Our final goal is the cessation of attacks on civilians. These goals clearly show that the United States government believes that human rights are being violated in Sudan and wants to put an end to it as soon as possible. The Sudanese government responded to the allegation of human rights violation by asserting that Americans simply don't understand their way of life in Sudan. However, the United States refuses to step down and accept such intolerable behavior.

Sudan's poor domestic policy has caused excessive strife and suffering in the lives of many subsistence farmers. Recently, oil production and exportation have stabilized Sudan's economy in a way that agriculture simply does not have the capacity to do. In the early 1990's agricultural production made up by far the largest portion of the nation's economy. Since 1990, as the nation's economy has slowly shifted toward the oil industry, the national gross domestic product has increased by 3.3 percent annually. In comparison, from 1970 through 1990, the gross domestic product increased by a meager three tenths of a percent each year. It seems that the more oil Sudan exports, the more stable and developed the economy and the nation itself become. As a result, most of Sudan's economic initiatives have revolved around the oil industry and not agriculture. To add insult to injury, subsistence farmers are plagued by violence, genocide, drought, floods, tsetse flies, and a poor infrastructure, with a government that does little to nothing to help them.

International governments have been slightly kinder to the Sudanese subsistence farmer. Much of the American financial aid goes to Sudan's poorest people, the displaced and the subsistence farmers. However, the overall direction of foreign involvement is toward the development of industry. Specifically, a large percentage of foreign aid is going into the oil industry. Sudan will develop more quickly, they believe, with a modern industrial economy and an improved infrastructure. Most government money has therefore been put into these two areas of interest. This is by no means entirely bad for subsistence farmers. An improved infrastructure would benefit not only the industrial economy, but also the average farmer. As the economy grows, it is possible that many subsistence farmers will begin large-scale commercial farming. It is very possible that the industrialization of Sudan will benefit all Sudanese citizens, not just those in industry.

The international policy regarding peace in Sudan is certainly the most important factor in increasing food and nutrition security in the nation. The civil unrest puts subsistence farmers at an extreme disadvantage. If violence disrupts their life or their farm, they could very easily lose an entire year's crop. To curtail this devastating effect, violence must be discontinued in the very near future. Fortunately, that is precisely the goal of America's, and much of the world's, foreign policy in Sudan. To improve the average farmer's situation, international organizations such as the United Nations must install a system in Sudan to establish and preserve the nation's peace. Similarly, Sudan's government must be willing to cooperate with whatever policy is enacted. If peace can be restored to Sudan, subsistence farmers will finally be able to obtain a state of sufficient food and nutrition security.

Sudan is a country that has been plagued with political and civil turbulence since its independence in 1956. Civil wars have raged within the country for nearly all of its existence. Despite the ongoing fighting, the nation's economy is improving with each passing year. In its fifty years of independence, the country has steadily transitioned from an almost exclusively agricultural economy to a primitive industrial market. This evolution has left many subsistence farmers, still the country's majority occupation, unnoticed and ignored by both the Sudanese government and the international community. These farmers are often the victims of violence and hate crimes supported by their own country's government. However, the world has not turned a blind eye to their anguish, and new international policies that promise to bring Sudan its long awaited peace are presently being enacted. If tranquility can be established in this unstable area, the nation's economy could easily climb to unprecedented heights. With an already growing economy and an aspiration for national harmony, Sudan has the potential to rise above the distress it is so accustomed to and present itself as an example for other sub-Saharan countries to follow.

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