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Kenya: A Glass of Water-Not So Simple

The country of Kenya, located in eastern Africa, has a long and colorful history. The Samburu, Luo, Turkana, and Maasai were a few of the earliest Kenyan tribes, all of which still exist today. Pre-colonially, Kenya traded with the Arab world for ivory and slaves. At one point, somewhere near ninety percent of the population on or around the coast was enslaved. In the middle to late nineteen fifties, the Mau Mau Uprising, an uprising meant to secure the independence of Africa, was violently suppressed, laying the foundation for future independence and killing anywhere from twelve thousand to twenty thousand people. This number is so broad because many Africans disappeared and their bodies were never found. The nation was ruled by the British from about 1920 until 1963, and after this, the government became a form of republic. Governmental stability has been shaky over the years and corruption is one of the main causes of widespread poverty, though there are many other causes, such as job scarcity and high fees for things like water and housing. Tourism is one of Kenya's most productive money makers, but many people who visit Kenya for vacation reasons will never know most of these things, including the fact that about thirty percent of the people are undernourished. Seventeen million people, close to half the population, are currently living below the poverty line and are hungry. This is the hidden side of Kenya- the slums and the poor.

The typical poor urban family in Kenya is composed of anywhere from six to eight people; the usual number of children is about six. Most families would want more male than female children, so as to continue the family lineage and to help provide funds. Also, a woman without any males is considered inadequate in Kenya. If a woman cannot produce a male heir for her husband, he can marry another woman to get a son.

A usual Kenyan diet is made up of tea, milk, a lot of corn, kale¹, meat, and a cultural dish called Ugali. Ugali is corn that has been ground up and mashed until almost all flavor is gone. Some eat it for every meal. Within the last five years, seventy- six percent of Kenyans say they've had to alter their diet due to food prices rising.

Studies show that poverty is related to the level of education one receives. In urban areas, primary school enrollment is higher than in rural areas, though after the age of fifteen, the reverse is true. In a slum in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, for every twenty-five thousand people there are no public schools and only two private ones. In most slums, though there might be many children in school, there are not enough teachers or facilities to comfortably house them. Sadly, when parents are low on money, one of the first things they do is take their children out of school. To add to these factors, many children work instead of going to school.

¹Kale is similar to spinach.

Health care in the slums is hard to come by, as drugs from chemists and clinics are not easy for people to access. Grace Awuor, a slum resident, commented about health care, 'When you are sick, you buy medicine from the local shops. If you are lucky, you will recover because the medicine is not usually the right one...sometimes there is no medicine even in the hospitals, so they send you out with a prescription...then the chemists are expensive so often one has to make do without the medicine.'(Oxfam GB 19) Without proper care, less than half of poor children receive proper vaccinations and immunizations. A survey of young children was taken, the results showing that during the two weeks leading up to the survey, sixty-four percent of children under three years of age had been ill with fever.

The jobs available are divided into three categories: agricultural self-employment, formal jobs, and informal jobs. About fifty percent are in the first category, fourteen percent in the second, and thirty-six in the third. Among those working one to twenty-seven hours a week, seventy percent live in poverty. Among the twenty-eight to thirty-nine hour workers, sixty-six percent live in poverty. And, finally, among those who work forty plus hours a week, the poverty rate is forty-six percent.

Average salary per person in poor households falls at about two thousand seven hundred and seventy-six KES or about thirty-two U.S. dollars monthly. About fifty-eight percent of Kenya lives on less than two dollars a day and about three hundred and sixty dollars a year. Unemployment is at the forty percent mark. So much money is spent on staple foods that parents resort to keeping their children out of school, not using 'pay as you go' toilets, walking instead of using public transportation, and limiting the amount of water purchased to a minimum.

Many families consume food from street vendors at least once a day in order to save money. These vendors serve githeri², french fries, doughnuts, porridge, vegetables, ugali, beef, and beans. The food costs anywhere from eleven cents to fifty cents in American dollars. Often, one can buy any portion, depending on the amount of money they have on them. "With 0.23 dollars, I am able to buy fries that my children can eat for lunch. This helps me save money since if I choose to cook, I will have to buy fuel, food and cooking oil, which increases my expenditure," (Bedah) says Jane Kimani, a resident of Korogocho. Though this food is cheaper, it might not always be hygienic. Also, due to food prices rising, about ninety percent of poor people in Nairobi alone confess to reducing the size and or frequency of meals.

In Kibera, one of Nairobi's largest slums, a group of mostly women have decided to take action and grow food for their families. Their form of gardening is called vertical farms or sack gardens. This involves poking holes in large recyclable bags and putting seeds and seedling into the bags at different levels. The women grow spinach, kale, sweet peppers, and spring onions, as well as other vegetables. Others in cities like Nairobi attempt to grow food for themselves and keep a few chickens or goats. Some are even able to sell their products.

As good as gardens sound, they have their issues. Firstly, goats will persistently try to get into the gardens and eat the vegetables. Secondly, something called 'midnight harvesting' happens, which is where humans sneak into the gardens at night and take the produce for themselves. There's also the problem of water. In the poor and slum neighborhoods, it's hard enough to get drinking water (not to mention the cleanliness of said water), but to try to get sanitary water is a real challenge. A certain amount of them solve this problem by tapping into untreated wastewater, which creates even more problems, as it contains viruses and bacteria. However, according to the gardeners, on the bright side, it's free, and they don't have to depend fully on the rain.

² Githeri is composed of beans and maize.

The problem with employment in Kenya is that you can't expect your workers to live on something next to nothing, as many employers do. Many of the jobs are in the informal employment sector, and quite a few of said jobs don't offer an income that would support a family. When earnings are reported, men report that their salaries are one and a half times as high as women's salaries and women are as much as five times more likely to be unemployed. Bill Gates once said something about properly utilizing half the population in the country- half the population being women; sixty-six percent of the informal working sector in Kenya is made up of women. In like manner, women do more unpaid work in the household, such as caring for children, the sick, and the elderly. Finally, for both women and men in the informal sector, jobs are simply hard to come by.

In Nairobi, the poorer half of the population occupies only five percent of the total residential land in the city. As one can imagine, this means the area is extremely over crowded. This issue is common to other cities like Nairobi as well. The slum population in Kenya grows about six percent per year. The main issue with building food markets, nutritional centers, or even hospitals is the question, 'Where are you going to put them in already overcrowded areas?' Another barrier in accessing food markets and adequate nutrition is that in many slum areas, there are no roads, which means two things. Firstly, when it rains, people have to walk through mud and sewage to get around. Second, police are unenthusiastic about entering these areas due to lack of roads. There's also the realization that parents have to make sacrifices, and sometimes, these sacrifices include their children's nutrition, knowingly or not.

Agricultural Productivity is affected greatly by water and sanitation. When untreated water gets into the soil, the soil becomes contaminated. This doesn't just hurt plants, but people and animals, too. If humans and animals inhale, touch, or ingest contaminated soil, or if humans eat animals or plants that have been contaminated, serious health problems can be caused. The plants absorb can the contamination through their roots, and then pass it on to other life forms. As described above, the consequences are not good.

If one were to visit Kenyan city slums, there would be few quality water or electricity connections to be found, and ninety-four percent of people lacking access to basic sanitation. Due to this, one hundred fifty-one out of every one thousand children born in slums die before the age of five. In Kibera, somewhere near forty-seven percent of children under the age of five have been stunted. Even more are severely stunted.

Inside informal settlements, only twenty- two percent of households have water provided to them by the Nairobi City Water & Sewerage Company. The majority of others purchase water from water kiosks- which usually charge high prices and are run by private entrepreneurs- and water delivery services. In Nairobi's slums, twelve percent have piped water supply and eighty percent complained of shortages and pipes running dry, while public taps provide water for only three percent of households. Commonly, people have piped water via illegal connections, which poses a threat to their health because of compromised water safety.

Due to erratic weather in Kenya during the past few years, droughts and water shortages have become common. Sanitation has struggled to improve as well, because people continue to migrate into the cities; urban growth goes unregulated.

Water and Sanitation access has been declared a human right by the United Nations, and improving access to them would save many lives. These two elements together help to prevent disease and should be coupled with improved hygiene practices and decent sanitation facilities. In some regions where water is far away, women and girls will often be sent out to fetch it. This takes up a large block of time, and sometimes stops girls from being able to attend school. If water access were improved, more children would be able to be educated.

Climate change has brought storms, which mean more water to some places, though that's necessarily a good thing. Flooding in cities can cause damage and yet more sickness. In other areas, the change has brought high temperatures and droughts, meaning the climate change also affects water scarcity. Higher temperatures might speed up the rate at which surface waters and reservoirs evaporate, so water would be harder to locate and keep than ever.

I think that all of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals are tied into secure water and proper sanitation. If we can secure proper water and sanitation, other goals will hopefully be improved. I have many ideas and suggestions. First, an increased initiative to keep children in school by teaching them and their parents the importance of education and lowering rates that parents have to pay to send their children to school. It would also be beneficial to provide jobs for those who have low paying jobs/no jobs. Some jobs could be provided in giving people the option to help better their communities. Second, provide a cheap, legal, and clean water source by helping and teaching communities how to build wells for water and how to purify the water that they have in these wells. Third, provide better housing options for slum residents and get people out of or rebuild slum neighborhoods. This is an area where you could bring jobs by having people work to build better homes in better areas. Fourth, get proper medicine and clinics for everyone, not just those who can afford it. I believe this could be accomplished by the creations in several small, local, and cheap clinics. Last, I would hope to provide equal pay for both women and men by forming laws against improper pay of certain groups. There are many more things we could do in Kenya; however, these are just a few of my thoughts.

In addition to these, I've found a project in Kenya called The Water Project that is very effective, but could be scaled up here in America. By this, I mean getting the word out about the situation in Kenya and how we could assist. Few children or adults know about these things, and perhaps if they did, we could get even more accomplished. If it were scaled up, more than ever could be accomplished for improving water access in Kenya. The Water project is successful because it is led by local people who have been trained to engage their communities in installing wells and teach about proper sanitation and hygiene. It is important for local people to be involved because they will feel that they have accomplished something for themselves and their communities.

To accomplish any great task, you have to have help in more than one area. Firstly, the government needs to be reformed, meaning rid the government of corruption. Kenya is one of the most corrupt nations, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Corporations should help support the water and sanitation cause and encourage their employees to as well. They also need to take a look at themselves and see if everything they're doing is good for everyone, not just themselves. Organizations like World Bank and the United Nations are doing wonderful things and should keep up the good work. Communities should develop programs to instruct citizens about things they can do to help themselves. Poor urban families can help by talking with those who want to help them.

The country of Kenya and its citizens have been through a lot. They've survived droughts and food crises, corrupt politicians and flooding. You'd think that perhaps after all they've been through, the world might give them a break, but you'd be wrong. Slum residents don't get a break. They have to pay high rent to keep their small and overcrowded units. Women and girls resort to prostitution when they fall on hard times. Urban dwellers are twice as likely as rural people to get HIV/AIDS. Latrines are managed by cartels, meaning that people have resorted to excreting in plastic bags that are abandoned afterward. Crime is so high that houses have barbed wire to keep them safe. Children work in hard and unsafe jobs instead of attending school. For the use of what we call common conveniences, the poor often have to pay as much as eight times as much as the rich. Immunizations are not considered necessary, and therefore children die of curable diseases. The next meal is whatever's cheapest. Mothers have to have as many children as they can to ensure at least one survives, but if many do survive, there might not be enough money to keep them. If a child is sick, the next day could be their last. Water is purchased, but often not enough, and not quality treated water. For us in America, a glass of water is nothing; we take it for granted. At many restaurants, it's even free. In Kenya's slums, a glass of treated water is a miracle. The next time you drink a simple glass of water, realize that you don't have to worry about what's in it. I hope that someday everyone can feel the same way.

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