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Nicaragua, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Malnutrition in Nicaragua

Living in South Dakota in a small rural community and being the daughter of a corn, soybean, and cattle farmer, we don't often think about others around the world that may be going hungry. We go about our daily lives with our friends going to school and participating in sports and our other activities, and we just don't stop to realize what others around the world have to face every day. They don't know where their next meal might be coming from and how they are going to get through the day. Nicaragua is one of those places that faces hunger challenges.

Nicaragua is located in Central America and borders the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean. It is between Costa Rica and Honduras. The lowest elevation point is the Pacific Ocean at 0 meters, and the highest point is Mogoton at 2,438 meters. The climate is tropical throughout most of the country so it is hot all year round. The temperature is usually around 81°F. In the lower areas it ranges between 72°F and 86°F. The dry season goes from December to May, and the rainy season is from June to November. The terrain has coastal plains rising to central interior mountains, and the narrow Pacific coastal plain is interrupted by volcanoes. Some of the natural resources include gold, silver, copper, tungsten, lead, zinc, timber, and fish. The capital of Nicaragua is Managua. Nicaragua is 42.2% agricultural land, 12.5% arable land, 2.5% permanent crops, 27.2% permanent pasture, 25.3% forest, and 32.5% of other land as reported by the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook (CIA). Agriculture products include coffee, bananas, sugarcane, rice, corn, tobacco, sesame, soya, and beans. It also produces beef, veal, pork, poultry, dairy products, shrimp, lobsters, and cotton. These can all be used as a source of income for the farmers.

Nicaragua has a republic government. They acquired independence from Spain on September 15, 1821. There have been many previous constitutions but the last one was effective on January 9, 1987. The constitution has been amended several times with the last being in 2014. They have a civil law system, and the supreme court can review administrative acts. The president is Jose Daniel Ortega Saavedra, and they serve 5 year terms. There are 90 members in the legislative branch, and they are also elected every 5 years. One of the things that kept people from getting good nutrition was the Contra War that lasted from 1980 to 1990 along with an economic crisis around 1987. The main reason for the war was because of inequality. There are also many natural hazards including earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides, and hurricanes. Hurricane Mitch caused a lot of damage to the infrastructure such as roads, water, and electricity in 1998. The hurricane hit all of Central America and 11,000 people died because of it. Wind speeds reached 180 mph, and there were gusts at 200 mph. Hurricane Mitch caused many people to be homeless, and there were about \$5 billion in damages total. The conditions were so bad that in 2001, only one out of five families had electricity (History).

There are many ethnic groups and languages spoken in Nicaragua. The ethnic groups include Mestizo, Caucasian, African American, and Amerindian. The languages spoken on the Caribbean coast are Spanish, Miskito, Mestizo, and English. Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Moravian, and Jehovah's Witnesses are the religions found there (CIA). The population in Nicaragua is 6.2 million (Global Food Security Index). The population growth rate is 1% (CIA). The urban population is 58.8% of the total population. The median age in Nicaragua is 24.2 years. Few couples get married through the church or state. They can still have the same legal status as civil marriages because of common-law. At least one third of Nicaraguan families were headed by women in the 1980s, and in urban households, that number was even higher. The common household in Nicaragua has six to eight people. They sometimes

include a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, an orphaned relative, a poor godchild, or a daughter with children of her own. It is also possible that a newly married couple would live with their parents. Urban families are usually smaller, but rural families like to have a large family so they can get all their daily work done. Families usually stay in touch with other relatives. City people depend on their relatives for jobs. The peasants buy more land near their land for their sons and daughters. When a child is baptized, the parents choose a godfather and godmother. The godfather and godmother are in charge of the baptism ceremony and a celebration after it. The godparents are usually trusted friends of the parents, but if it is a lower-class family, they will choose godparents in the upper-class. They do this so the godparents will be able to help the child (Merrill).

Malnutrition is a serious problem in many countries including Nicaragua. Forty-six percent of children in Nicaragua suffer from malnutrition. Malnutrition occurs when a person does not get the right food or is not getting the right kind of food (World Food Programme). Malnutrition is harmful to children because it affects their brain development and physical development so people living in poverty have a higher chance of becoming ill and not learning as well as people who have plenty of healthy food to eat. People who are malnourished have a harder time having the ability to work and earn an income. There are many different causes for malnutrition, including lack of money, lack of education, an unhealthy diet, no access to clean water, agricultural issues, and underage mothers. Malnutrition has been a problem in Nicaragua for many years, so it is time to bring that to an end. One of the main things we have to do is help them so they can help themselves. We need to teach them how to take care of crops, how to take care of their families, and how to educate their children.

Poverty affects about 2.3 million people in Nicaragua. It is a low-income country with forty-eight percent of the population living on less than one U.S. dollar per day, and seventy-six percent of people live on less than two U.S. dollars on a daily basis. It is the poorest country in Central America, but in 2014, the economy grew 4.7% (CIA). The people in Nicaragua do not have enough money to buy healthy food, which can lead to malnutrition. The poverty rate has been decreasing in recent years, but because of natural disasters and different prices, the poverty rate increased in some areas. Many rural families earn an income from their agriculture and activities off the farm. Usually, at least one member of the family works off the farm. Most women in rural areas cultivate land that is not theirs because not very many women have land under their own name. Many families in poverty live in the central region of Nicaragua where it is highly populated. There aren't very many natural resources, and there is a scarce water supply. Rural people depend on only a few crops such as sorghum, maize, beans, and vegetables which means droughts cause problems for these people. Another reason for poverty is because there aren't many options for jobs so it is hard to find a source of income.

Studies have shown a definite link between malnutrition and a lack of an education. A major issue in Nicaragua is that kids are not getting enough education. School in Nicaragua is very different than school in the United States. The students there go to school in shifts, either the morning, afternoon, or evening because they have to help earn income for their families. In 2003, 823,000 students did not finish the school year (Foundation for Sustainable Development). This is because the parents and students have to pay for a majority of the school supplies, electric bills, and cleaning materials. The only thing the government pays for are the teacher salaries, special training, and some of the school repairs. The kids end up not going to school because they don't have enough money. The students have limited opportunities for different subjects because of the lack of money and facilities. They don't have sports equipment, musical instruments, or computer technology. The government should be paying for more so the children can attend school. They should also supply more fun things so the kids will want to go to school. The education program is improving however. The Nicaragua Ministry of Education achieved a Healthy School Initiative in 2001 (FSD). Many organizations such as UNICEF and the Pan American Health Organization participated to help include lesson plans. It also helped to improve water and sanitation facilities. So far, 184 schools have joined this program.

There are two different types of malnutrition. One type occurs because a person is not getting enough food to eat. The other is when a person is getting enough to eat, but it isn't healthy food and they aren't getting the right nutrients to support their body. The meals in Nicaragua don't have a lot of different food types and nutrients. They consist mostly of carbohydrates and lack protein. Most meals include corn tortillas and their main source of protein is from beans. The people don't realize how important it is to have a balanced diet and to consume different types of fruits and vegetables. A great amount of the population is lacking to consume fruits and vegetables. There is widespread vitamin and mineral deficiencies because of this. The population of Nicaragua faces problems of Vitamin A deficiency and anemia due to iron deficiency in women and children. One in three children has Vitamin A deficiency and one in three women have anemia. These deficiencies are greater in rural and urban groups with low incomes (Household Food Security). With junk foods becoming so popular, this problem is getting worse. Children will beg for money on the streets, and then they go spend the money at a local food store on snack foods instead of getting something nutritious that is good for them. The thing we need to focus on is quality and quantity. They need good quality food with the right nutrients and the right amount of it. The Nicaraguan government is also stepping in and helping. They give incentives to farmers to agree to grow more grain. They are also giving some free meals at school for the students. This is all helping to reduce malnutrition in children.

About 10% of Nicaragua's land is cultivated (Culture of Nicaragua). The soil is fertilized in the Pacific Coast region because of the volcanic ash. Rice is the country's most important food crop, but they also cultivate maize, sorghum, dry beans, soya beans, and tobacco. Coffee, cotton, bananas, and beef are the main exports. Nicaraguan farms have low crop yields, a lack of agricultural support, and no cooperatives for farmers. To help these people get a better assortment of food, we can help them start community or school gardens and teach them how to take care of the gardens. Missionaries are helping address this problem and they are helping them start these gardens. Serious diseases such as coffee rust can reduce the yields of the coffee crops and cause them to make less money. We can teach them how to get rid of the coffee rust and how to keep a good crop. We can also help give them the tools they need to improve their crop production and apply low-cost organic growing methods. An organization called GAIN worked with the Nigerian government to help them end malnutrition. They worked to give them better nutrition and agriculture. GAIN partnered with numerous other organizations, and it seems to be working. They should take what is working in other countries and try to do the same in Nicaragua to help put a stop to malnutrition and hunger.

About 75% of the population in rural areas do not have access to clean water which can lead to disease and diarrhea. Sometimes the result of malnutrition is disease. Malnutrition is the largest single contributor to disease in the world (WPF). The people that live in rural areas in Nicaragua are most likely to have water that isn't safe. The Personal Hygiene and Sanitation Education project helped to minimize diarrhea cases by showing children personal hygiene and sanitation practices. It assisted about 20,000 students across 40 schools in 126 rural communities. There was a 42% decrease in the diarrhea cases for children under five (Plan). A Drinking Water Technical School was created so students can learn how to design, build, and maintain rural drinking water and sanitation projects in Nicaragua. They can earn a nationally accredited degree all for free. Water For People is an organization that successfully worked in Nicaragua's neighboring country, Honduras. They opened an office in Nicaragua in 2010 and worked to install their first water and sanitation program. In 2013, they focused their efforts on reaching "Everyone Forever" in San Rafael del Norte and La Concordia (Making a Difference).

Part of the issue for malnutrition is not having good caretakers for the children. If the parents or other people in the community do not know how to properly care for children and get them what they need, then the children will end up suffering from malnutrition or other diseases. Most of the time, fathers do not know how to take care of a child. So if something were to happen to the mother, the child could become malnourished and not have what they need to live. Unplanned pregnancies are a problem in

Nicaragua. One out of every four children is born to a mother under the age of fifteen, so the babies are more likely to have a low birthweight. These babies are born to mothers with little or no formal education. One of the main causes of their nutritional status is due to the short duration of breastfeeding and introducing food too early and other liquids that satisfy hunger but do not nourish the body. To help with pregnancies, educating the teenagers about family planning could be helpful. This way, they know right from wrong and the pregnancies can decrease. The main reason for teenage pregnancies is because of rape. Sometimes it even happens within a family. When this does happen, the girls aren't getting the proper care they need. The health providers have to treat them like a normal pregnant woman. This specific problem is not getting enough attention and it is not going away. These girls aren't fit to be having children, especially under the age of fifteen. If they aren't healthy, their babies can't be healthy. The UNICEF organization is working in Nicaragua. They are training teachers, adolescents, and community leaders to prevent trafficking in their areas and create a safe environment (UNICEF).

I really enjoy participating in sports, and I'm sure many other kids enjoy them too. Sports could be a good way to encourage kids to go to school. The national sport in Nicaragua is baseball. If the schools had baseball equipment, more kids would maybe want to go to school so they could use that equipment. This would also be good exercise for the kids, and they could have fun doing it. If they knew about baseball, they might find a baseball player they look up to that finished school. Even if they don't like baseball, there are many other activities they can participate in, including soccer. There is also fishing, hiking, and biking. If they live along the coastline, there are numerous water activities such as diving and snorkeling. Many teenage girls are expected to take care of their younger siblings and don't usually get a chance to play any sports. In Granada, Nicaragua, Soccer Without Borders allows girls to play soccer with their peers (Soccer Without Borders). This encourages them to stay in school and make good decisions. If the girls participate in this program, they can earn points that can then be used to get school supplies, clothes, shoes, and any other needs they may have. This is a very good program because it helps them develop skills and it opens new doors for them. They can set higher expectations for themselves and they can overcome some of their problems.

To solve the problems of hunger and malnutrition, it will take a combination of many different actions. There are many organizations such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme helping. There are also many religious groups working very hard to bring an end to hunger and malnutrition. They provide programs to teach nutrition, keeping food secure, clean water, and good hygiene. The government has a school food program that helps local public schools serve a nutritious meal to over ten thousand children every day. School meals can help treat and prevent child hunger and malnutrition while improving their performance at school and also provides a strong incentive to have parents send their children to school. This group also encourages school and family gardens to provide healthy food and serve as a learning experience. They also teach students and parents about good nutrition and how to raise a garden so that they can have their own gardens at home. These activities helped improve food safety and helped the family economy as their food expenses were reduced by growing their own gardens. These community programs help families become healthier and give them the power to reduce hunger and help their communities have a better future.

There are many different areas in which families need to be educated. Bringing in other farmers to teach them how to increase crop yields and to improve their product quality would help. Helping them get to larger markets would improve their profit. Also, having technical support in areas of crop health and managing pest problems. They could try some non-traditional crops such as honeydew melons, cantaloupe, sesame seed, onions, asparagus, and artichokes to increase food diversity and improve nutrition. To help with the number of unplanned pregnancies, having education and family planning may be helpful. Volunteers who are educated on these things could go and teach teenagers and young adults what they need to know about it. Education will help the future generations and also people in the community to bring their families out of poverty.

We should all do our part to contribute to help solve hunger and malnutrition. There are many people that are making a difference through their hard work and sacrifice to help others in need. Another way that people can help are by having food drives. Every little bit can help and one person can't do it alone. There are many people changing lives in Nicaragua. Everyone can help by donating money to organizations or religious groups that raise money to help feed the hungry and malnourished. There are many organizations such as Daily Giver that provides the Technical School of Water Supply that we can donate money to so students can attend school for free. There are also other organizations where all you have to do is donate some money. Even if everybody donated a little, it can end up being a lot. Most of us have more than we need to eat and we should think about giving back to those who have less. We have to help them so they can help themselves.

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