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Malawi, Factor 20: Farm to Market

Malawi: Chimanga ndi moyo

Food insecurity is something we are constantly surrounded by in varying degrees. For the vast majority of the industrialized world it's something we see on cable news. Even though it is a threat on the streets of the wealthiest cities in America it is nothing compared to the massive scale that plays out each day in The Warm Heart of Africa.

Every beauty queen aspires to “end world hunger” but a retweet, like, or share will not and cannot realistically mask the effects of hunger globally. How do you even begin to fathom food insecurity in your own community let alone a country you have never seen with your own eyes? You see, solving hunger is arguably more elaborate than rocket science when you contemplate the complicity behind the issue. Each country has its' own needs that must be tailored to. Each characteristic of hunger in a country is its' own thread that makes up the unique textile of global food insecurity.

The solution is not as simple as just giving the people of Malawi food but to teach them to acquire it on their own. Overall, it is the lack of education, corrupt politics, social inequalities and other cultural as well as geographical aspects that caused this hunger. Seldom are those issues acknowledged but because of them 1 in 9 people around the world will go to bed hungry tonight (Zero).

If you were to walk the dirt paths of Malawi and strike up conversation with the natives you passed, you would find a common story. 90% of Malawians live in a rural area and 80% of Malawians depend on growing maize to support their families (Food). Most families will consist of many extended relatives, averaging about 4 people per room in a household. The natives thrive off of mostly maize flour and any other carbohydrate based food to give them enough energy to endure their demanding day to day lives. It is rare to witness a Malawian child to receive a quality education and for them to want to excel towards an even higher level education. Only 1% of Malawian children will thrive beyond the secondary education level (Education). HIV and AIDS cases are on the rise and with the lack of necessary health care the number of cases will keep accumulating (African Vault). In the year 2015 alone 980,000 Malawians were living with HIV and 27,000 Malawians died from HIV related illnesses (HIV). An American's life expectancy is around 80 years old whereas in Malawi the expectancy is placed somewhere around 50 years of age (Health). To put that into perspective, an American experiences their “midlife-crisis” around age 50, the life expectancy of the average Malawian. Which of these is the real crisis?

Malawi is a small and fragile African country, just south of the Congo. Despite its' close proximity to one of the most hostile areas in Africa, Malawi is evolving into a hit travel location amongst tourist (Come). Malawi's appeal is breathtaking scenery, open spaces, and their tender hearted natives. They may not have extravagant landmarks like Las Vegas but instead their visitors are charmed by the feeling of belonging while in a place they've never been.

To an outsider it appears to be a slice of heaven but to its' permanent occupants it is a chunk of Hell. The logistics paint a picture of misery. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in Africa if not the poorest and one of the top 10 poorest countries in the world (African Vault). The people of Malawi depend on the government like a newborn baby clings to its' mother. They spend much of their time searching for jobs where there are none instead of creating them. The occupants of Malawi expect the government to provide for them but resources seem to run scarce.

Those who stayed close to agriculture tend to be the most prosperous and independent. "Chimanga ndi moyo" is the Malawians mantra meaning, "maize is life"(Food). Agriculture accounts for a third of their GDP and 90% of their exports despite the constant droughts, lack of equipment, and no knowledge of modern irrigation (Zezeza). The question then becomes - how can we take their main source of income and make it thrive? We must also find a way to do this in a way that doesn't deprive them of their culture, transforming what they know best, producing maize flour.

Driving through Malawi you will pass through fields upon fields of maize. It is rare to find a bare space of arable land not being used to grow it. Once the rain comes all hands are on deck planting. Not a single family member is excused from tending to the hopeful crop. Even with maize producing families living with extended relatives, there is always work needing to be completed. Within eight weeks from planting the long awaited maize is ready to be harvested. Malawi's climate causes devastating droughts bringing disheartening doubt as each harvest approaches. Therefore, it is a grand hallelujah when there is a successful harvest gathered. Some families eat it fresh but the most sustainable choice is taking the maize to a mill. Culturally, mills are a women's work in Malawi. Women huddle around a loud grinder and place the presoaked maize inside. While the maize flour is being made there are large puffs of dust being exerted from the machine. Evidently, the ladies working the mill typically develop a bad cough from being exposed to it for so long. The grain then goes through a process called "winnowing". This is when the workers separate the bran and the glorious, maize flour. Since the Malawian people must not be wasteful with their resources, the bran is crafted into alcohol or livestock feed (Food). While this process sounds fine, there is a major disadvantage that prohibits maximum profit, travel.

There is irony in a successful harvest. The Malawian maize producers know there is a long trek ahead of them to get the maize to the mill and this has been a battle for many years, without change. Not taking any of the maize to the mill is not an option for most growers. It is rare a family lives near a mill but it is near to impossible to get enough food without having the maize grinded into flour. One bag of maize flour is enough to last a large family two weeks. There has to be a way to create a more accessible mill while still teaching the Malawian people. If we made a mill without consulting the Malawian maize producers and teaching them, we will benefit no one. It is vital we turn this devastation into a learning opportunity. Throughout the process of aiding Malawian maize production we must work hand in hand with their people. If we do not, we risk providing more harm than good.

The objective is to make mills more accessible to maize growers and teach them how to do it independently. To solve this we need to reflect on the Han Dynasty which brought about the creation of the watermill. Malawi is known for its' rivers, 14 total (Come). The Malawian growers are blessed with access to these free power sources and need to take advantage of them. The water mill is a good choice because it requires minimal resources and no electrical power, which they lack both of. Hopefully, if one group of growers has a successful water mill they will share the design with other villages. Think about it, if a farmer knows how hard it is to tug the maize to a mill they will be timid to increase their maize production. However, if they knew they were close to a mill they would grow a surplus of maize and that

is where the profit lies. We need to uplift the Malawian people into growing more maize instead of discouraging the production of maize flour.

Bill Gates once stated, “Our success has really been based on partnerships since the very beginning.” The more support Malawian agriculture can receive with funding and teaching the farmers, the more efficiently this project will operate. Our first concern is getting the necessary supplies for the water mills. GracePoint church in Northwest Arkansas gives a percentage of their Sunday tithe to global missionary work, especially projects in Africa (McDaneil). They send multiple trips per year and have a passion for providing wells in struggling nations. GracePoint Church is constantly looking for ways to expand their impact on developing nations and have sustained projects like this before. Trump Tours is another hidden gem in Northwest Arkansas. They provide American agriculturalist a tour of farming and livestock production in other countries (Humbert). Trump Tours could partner American agriculturalist with students at The University of Malawi Polytechnic. The University of Malawi has programs in the field of both engineering and architecture. The students at the university will be in charge of crafting the blueprint for the watermill with the assistance of the agriculturalist from Trump Tours. It is crucial we take this opportunity to educate Malawi’s aspiring farmers, engineers, architects, and job makers; by partnering with the next generation as often as possible. Another organization that works closely with education within Malawi is Ripple Africa. Ripple Africa sends teachers to Malawi for a minimum of three to four weeks where they teach the basic core classes and an agriculturally related class (Introduction). They would be another essential partnership to help educate the next generation of Malawians. Ernie Fletcher explained it perfectly when he said, “Education is our greatest opportunity to give an irrevocable gift to the next generation”.

However, what is the fate of families who rely on maize flour when there is a drought? A healthy acre of corn requires 600,000 gallons of water to produce 200 bushels of corn (Mowitz). With Malawi’s unpredictable rainy seasons they’re going to need a reliable backup source of nourishment. They need something that would require minimal care and is rapidly producing. Rabbits are a fast protein that have a gestation period of only 31 days and can produce upwards of 12 kits each litter (Chapter). The rabbits could be distributed through the maize mills as the maize producers will be the ones who need them dearly. Heifer International is an organization that provides developing nations, like Malawi, with livestock (Give). Trump Tours could also be another great resource by bringing in American agriculturalist to educate the Malawian people on caring for rabbits. Benjamin Franklin once said, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

So the solution becomes a two-pronged approach. First, make the maize production more accessible and reliable. Second, introduce a new protein source to supplement the sometimes unreliable maize production. The inter-twined system of maize and rabbit production could be overseen by a developmental Board in the United States, and executed on the ground by an operationally focused Board in Malawi.

The two teams of board members will be chosen from both the United States and Malawi to ensure the upkeep of this project for years to come. The board members will consult with each other to make sure the mills are functioning and the project is still benefiting maize producers. We will not be putting a timeline on how long we spend in Malawi helping but instead a quota of ten water mills must be met before we let the Malawian people take over the maize mill production. During the first ten mills the Board Members from the United States will monitor to make sure everything is being done correctly and not causing harm to Malawi. The Board Members from the United States will have a representative from each organization that is assisting this project along with professors from various colleges in the USA.

To ensure this project is sustainable for the Malawian people we must pass over the project to the board members of Malawi once the quota is met and no concerns arise. The board members from Malawi will consist of professors from Malawi Polytechnic and other universities who are interested, along with members from the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation located in Malawi. The objective of having board members in Malawi is to require minimal assistance from outside nations. In the case of a natural disaster or any other corruption that would cause harm to this project, the board members from the United States would meet and discuss if they need to intervene. The board members from both the United States and Malawi act as a form of supervision and will be called to make decisions about the water mills or rabbits when deemed necessary.

By providing Malawians with more accessible maize mills we will be encouraging a growth in maize flour production, opening up local jobs while teaching the next generation. The rabbits would provide vital backup nourishment in the case of a drought or failed harvest. It is important when an outside nation supports another country that they are not intervening culturally or politically. We hope this project does more than just support Malawian maize producers but Malawi as a whole. This project's overall goal was to combat hunger in Malawi and give the next generation a brighter future. William Kankwanba, a Malawian innovator, said "I went to sleep dreaming of Malawi, and all the things made possible when your dreams are powered by your heart" (William).

In the time it took you read this paper, globally 72 children have died from hunger (Know). It is important we spring into action and extend our hand to Malawi. This essay has only captured snapshots of the struggles Malawian maize producers encounter every harvest. The project conveyed in this essay may not be the most elaborate or scientific but will help the country prosper in immeasurable ways. "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed", Proverbs 19:17. I hope your heart is heavy reading this paper from a society that views eating as a social gathering and recreational activity instead of a means of keeping yourself healthy and alive. While we plan our next dinner date there are those across the Atlantic who are gathering scraps to feed their families and then themselves.

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