

The Nauru Syndrome

A case study between the years 1970 - 2000

The Nauru syndrome was observed among the native people on the island of Nauru between 1970 to 2000, a period of 30 years. The Nauru syndrome describes a sudden change in the customary nourishment status caused by sudden wealth, which results in nutritional diseases. Nauru is a small and isolated island with a small population. Economic change was uniform and the entire population was directly affected by this change. For this reason, the Nauru phenomenon is regarded as unique and it can be used as an example of similar developments.

Lying close to the equator, the Pacific island of Nauru, with an area of only 21 square kilometers, has been settled for a long time. This very secluded coral island, covered in bird droppings, has barely any fertile land. No mammals besides humans have lived there and there are no sources of fresh water. Although there is a little rain, food crops such as coconuts and panda nuts thrive successfully. In the past, the people on Nauru did not eat any meat from mammals. Limited fish species from the coral waters, the occasional frigate bird and nuts made up their usual diet. When in 1798 English whalers came close to the shores of Nauru, they called it "Pleasant Island" because the islanders, who approached the whaling ship in small boats, demonstrated no hostility. This was certainly due to the fact that the people there hardly ate meat and so they were not aggressive by nature.

The bird droppings on Nauru, also called guano, contain a very high amount of phosphate. Phosphate, which can be sold as a valuable fertilizer for modern agriculture, was intensively mined in Nauru from the second half of 20th century and exported to developed countries. In 1968 Nauru became independent and in 1970 the phosphate mining was transferred to the local government. The population of Nauru was only 4000. Because of the lucrative trade in guano, the per capita income suddenly became the second highest in the world, after Saudi Arabia. Indeed the per capita income of Nauru was actually the highest in the world because Nauru had no monarchy nor any existing social hierarchy and so the whole population owned these revenues. The standard of living rose in a short time to one of the highest in the world. Guest workers were used to mine the harsh and harmful phosphate. Due to the abundance of wealth, the locals needed to do hardly any work and that small barren island became a kind of luxury hotel.

The enormous buying power enabled the Nauruans to have an abundant and varied diet. Value foods such as fish, meat, eggs and dairy products were imported and consumed excessively. In under two decades, the population of Nauru became the fattest in the world and over 90% of older people suffered from diabetes, heart attacks and other fatal food-related diseases. First-grade free medical care with the best medicines and the best treatment could not help to reduce this dangerous tendency. By the millennium, the phosphate mining was nearly exhausted and at the same time the short-lived wealth of the islanders ended. What remains is a destroyed landscape and the ruined health of older Nauruan.

The market economy and globalization in turn produced the nouveau riche. Wealth is used to buy food and the most important part of a meal contains products of animal origin. People who have consumed little of these products are slowly beginning to become familiar with them. The more wealth there is, the more dairy products, fish, eggs and meat are regarded as ordinary food. Within a few years, people grow fatter and this is perceived by the outside world as a sign of prosperity. At a certain point, such people start to feel uncomfortable, but the thought of their purchasing power, a doctor's visit and better drugs soothes their fears. Their discomfort intensifies as time goes on. Visits to the doctor become more frequent and the range of drugs they are forced to take, becomes more important than daily food. However, good drugs, better doctors and expensive hospitals do not always help and a person's life is doomed. This is where the Nauru-syndrome sets in.