

Risha Shetye  
Valley Southwoods Freshman High School  
West Des Moines, IA  
Guatemala, Factor 16: Education

## Guatemala: Education: The Guaranteed Path to a Peaceful Nation

Nelson Mandela's words, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world," can bring rays of sunshine when implemented in a country like Guatemala. With dire poverty and extreme violent conditions prevalent in several regions of Guatemala, the only hope of bringing transformation into the lives of millions is through the path of enlightenment. Education is the best means of giving people a new chance of living a free life and bringing peace and harmony to the citizens of Guatemala. It is through education that the masses will understand the importance of a quality life and lead the country to a better economic path. Promoting education of children is the best way to ensure the success of future generations by building schools in villages and installing a combined farming and nutrition curriculum, implementing teacher programs in urban areas to reduce crime rates and violence in society, and closing gender gaps by implementing governance curriculums which can lead to quality and sustainable lifestyles, building a stronger community and a peaceful nation.

### **Introduction and Background:**

A major dilemma grappling Guatemala is the current system of education which is very substandard. Although primary school education is mandatory, it lacks quality and students do not come to school. Teachers are not educated to a high enough standard to be teaching the material in schools, which leads to poor student performance. According to UNICEF, even in the first grade of schooling, 30% of children did not pass because the quality of the teachers was dismal. In addition, only 80% of boys and 73% of girls graduate the sixth grade of schooling. Enrollment rates drop dramatically after sixth grade at barely 40%. . Because of the lack of education, most children who drop out of schools (mainly young girls) cannot get a job because they do not have even the most basic of education. The rates of dropouts between primary to secondary school are shocking. Primary school enrollments are at about 98.6% for males and 97.5% for females. In secondary school, grades seven through twelve, school enrollment rates are at 48% for males and 44.3% for females. Both rates fall more than 50% ("UNICEF"). This is likely because the Peace Accords guarantee free education for grades Pre-K through sixth, but the government does not cover the costs for secondary education. This is detrimental for farming families, because they do not make enough money to send their children to secondary schools. As a result it becomes nearly impossible to get out of a fate destined to farming. In rural areas, farmers cannot afford the heavy cost of education for their children, even though education in Guatemala is "theoretically free". Like public schools in America there are many other costs associated with education. School uniforms and supplies like textbooks are expenses not all families can afford to pay ("The State of Education in Guatemala"). Additionally, many schools are located outside of small villages and are too costly and inefficient to travel to. Furthermore, most farmers across the nation of Guatemala have barely enough resources to support their families; so farmers make next to nothing over any of the food they produce. During the harvesting season, even if these farmers can make a profit, children are stuck at home working days out in the fields to help support their families instead of being in school, learning to read and write. Although children are a tremendous help to their families by working on farms and minimizing additional labor costs, they lose out on getting basic education and their economic status remains largely the same as their parents when they become adults.

The population of Guatemala is approximately 15 million people, which ranks 69th in the world and 9th in Latin America (“Guatemala: Populations”). Most of the population is indigenous. In the areas of Guatemala with indigenous population, the residents usually speak one of the Mayan languages or Spanish. In these areas, there is also a substantial amount of farming done. Agricultural workers live in impoverished conditions with poor housing facilities, and earn less than the minimum wage requirement which is three U.S. dollars per day (“Guatemala - Working Conditions”). Approximately 48 % of the land is rural and 52% is urban (“Urban Populations (% of Total)”). In rural areas, where farming families work and reside, major crops such as maize and beans are grown as well as cash crops like wheat, sugar, coffee, potatoes and bananas, staples for many Latin American families (Immink, M.D. C., and J. A. Alarcón). Families in rural Guatemala typically are larger than families from the city because they have to work in fields and villagers are not taught about family planning. The income from agriculture is limited because of unfavorable conditions like crop failures, limited access to markets, and subsistence farming. The children work around the farms during harvesting season which lasts around six months with many hours of preparation. They do not get a good education. Poverty rates keep increasing as there is not enough land to meet food demands of increasing migrating population in rural areas due to high crime rates in cities.

Guatemala’s crime and violence rates are very high. Even after 1996 when the Peace Accord was signed after the civil war, crime rates are still common. These crimes stem from the high levels of violence in the 36 year long war that spanned from 1960 to 1996. Guatemala suffers from 16 murders per day (COHA<sup>2</sup>). This makes Guatemala a very unsafe place to live. There is also a shocking amount of inequality in Guatemala. Most of the observable inequality are the cases of gender bias. Women in Guatemala do not get the same opportunities as men. The current scenario of the country and its residents clearly depict the number of challenges that have plagued the country and the impact of the challenges have caused an immense amount of pain for the citizens of Guatemala.

### **Barriers in the Path of the Nation’s Progress:**

#### **Problem #1:**

The first problem is the lack of education and schools in rural areas of Guatemala. In villages where farming is the primary occupation, children are forced to work in fields and support their families rather than going to school and learning how to read and write. Instead of becoming lettered, the possible impact of a family being extremely poor affects the work that they do everyday by forcing the entire family into labor. This creates an entire layer of obstacles that families have to break down to let their children go to school. The second layer to this problem includes schools being extremely far away from villages. Besides the government just provides a building for the school and the cost of the educational burden like textbooks entirely is the responsibility of students. Because schools are far from villages, parents in Guatemala cannot send children to school because they cannot obtain the funds to send their children to school, let alone transport them there. There would also be other costs such as tuition (depending on the grade), uniforms and school supplies (Global Education Fund). The rates of sending children to school would eventually be too high to keep up and would hurt the residents of rural Guatemala.

#### **Problem #2:**

The second dilemma is the high drop-out rate of students in schools due to high crime rate and inferior teaching quality in schools. This problem can also affect women in urban areas drastically because they can be abused (Melville). Parents do not want their children to be in an environment where the crime rates are high and that is the reason for children dropping out of schools. Compared to the United States, Guatemala has a murder rate twelve times higher. Since the murder rates are at an all time high, according

to COHA<sup>2</sup>, “Guatemala has become the fourth most murderous country in the world.” In the United States there were approximately 86,487 primary public schools in 2007 (NCES), however in Guatemala, there are substantially fewer: a number of 12,500 primary schools. Without education, people have no other option to make money other than engaging in low-paying jobs or indulging in criminal activities. Most teachers in urban areas of Guatemala do not even know what they are teaching and are unqualified. Guatemalan teachers could not even answer 80% of the material they taught in schools correctly (COHA). This leads urban students to not receive a good education and therefore are more likely to engage in criminal activities because they do not receive a good quality education and therefore are unlettered and succumb to a life of crime.

**Problem #3:**

The third issue in Guatemala is gender bias. Women are not getting the same opportunities as men and are even being oppressed on campuses in schools (Melville). Women are coerced to drop-out of secondary schools because they are married at a very young age and this eventually results in bearing children at very early ages in their lives (“The State of Education in Guatemala”). This is also an example of the gender disparities that need to be solved in Guatemala. Women in Guatemala are objectified and are only seen to be capable of getting married and having children at a very young age. Therefore in rural villages, education is often not an option for them. Women do not have any opportunities to better their conditions and sometimes they cannot even contribute to their family’s finances thus leading to extremely low economic conditions.

**Past and Present Solutions:**

After considering the challenges and their impacts, it is time to seek solutions and check if there are any efforts taken in the past or present towards ameliorating the conditions in Guatemala. In 1996, there was an attempt on improving the quality of education in Guatemala through the Peace Accords. A peace treaty between the President of Guatemala at the time and an indigenous rebel group was created and signed after the civil war. This treaty involved clauses about guaranteeing free education to all Guatemalan citizens from pre-primary schooling through sixth grade. This treaty also improved vocational education and even prevented another civil war from breaking out. The major flaw with this treaty, almost 22 years later, is that the policies have not been updated and therefore have not adapted to today’s society. Currently, there are inadequate resources to give children the education they need such as textbooks and good teachers. These impediments clearly show that the efforts made in 1996 were not successful. A study even concluded that the rebel group violated the treaty which escalated violence (COHA<sup>2</sup>). Nevertheless, currently there are several other organizations working toward promoting education and improving the situation in Guatemala.

The Global Education Fund is an organization that transforms children's lives in India, Kenya and Guatemala. They donate textbooks and other school supplies to orphanages or learning centers. It removes barriers for children who want to complete their education and have a good life. The Global Education Fund gives grants to students in these developing countries to help children obtain the education they desire (“The State of Education in Guatemala”). Another organization located in Guatemala that helps children with getting a proper education is Avivara. The motto of the organization is “Giving hope to the Future through Education”. This statement perfectly summarizes the values of Avivara. They believe education is the only pathway out of poverty and a life of crime. They help students by giving out grants, scholarships and having programs that establish new schools such as the New Mayan School in the village of Quiche, that teach students about Mayan culture, how to read and write as well as learning how to be proactive and know about your rights in the modern world or other programs that involve mentors going to different public schools and helping students learn new concepts

("Avivara Affiliate Programs"). The success of these organizations especially Avivara has been possible by evaluating and identifying the needs of individual schools and implementing projects as per these requirements. In some cases, they evaluated that a breakfast program for students was necessary while some schools did not have basic infrastructure or equipment and providing basic resources like desks, lighting, was absolutely necessary. In some cases teacher training became a good strategy to improve the quality of education ("Avivara.org").

Although these trends of improving educational efforts in Guatemala are increasing now, the nation has not adequately progressed. Two million children after finishing primary school still cannot get a job and make money; so they live under the poverty line ("Education"). At this point, a look at efforts taken in other countries may provide a helpful insight. One such successful story is of the efforts taken by the Sehgal foundation in India. The Sehgal Foundation is a non-profit organization that has made good progress with educating women and increasing student enrollment in schools. The Sehgal Foundation identified that the lack of infrastructure in schools like water problems and sanitation issues were barriers for girls to attend schools. By focusing on these issues and finding solutions to water problems like rain-water harvesting and desalination and building toilets in schools, they made inroads that helped more girls to attend schools. The foundation also helped villages in India establish a governance curriculum which eventually teaches citizens to be proactive and create a good life for themselves ("Good Rural Governance"). By educating citizens of their rights and making them confident self-advocates to interact with government officials about local problems, the Good Rural Governance policy adopted by Sehgal foundation has helped villagers to become confident community leaders interacting with government officials in addressing local problems. Just like Avivara, Sehgal foundation tackled the problem of poverty, by not only making education possible for villagers but also identifying other obstacles like water scarcity and sanitation problems. Eliminating these impediments turned out to be a successful strategy. Improving infrastructure and empowering girls and training villagers about their rights helped to improve economic progress in rural villages.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

It becomes evident that the key to promoting a good quality educational system in Guatemala is to have a stellar infrastructure support in villages and schools. The government of Guatemala should improve education in rural areas by building more combined primary and secondary schools in villages with a built-in nutrition and farming curriculum. Steps taken for improving infrastructure would help rural communities immensely because transportation fees would virtually be non-existent. Students could walk to school and come back quickly so their farming jobs at home still be finished during the harvesting season. The reason the school should be combined into primary and secondary is to increase the students' chances of going to secondary school in their local community. If there is a chance of having a built-in nutrition and farming curriculum, children would most likely attend secondary school to go to the nutrition and farming class to help their families learn the best ways to farm and stay healthy. While there would be some costs going to secondary school, the benefits of adding a vocational curriculum would outweigh the negative factor of expenses. This also directly links to food security because if all farming families have a proper education and have strategies to farm, the amount of food could substantially increase. This solves for hunger problems in all of Guatemala. The combination of primary and secondary schools and the addition of a vocational curriculum in schools would be a first step in enticing more rural parents to allow their children to go to schools and would gradually solve hunger issues in Guatemala.

To solve for the absurd amounts of crime and violence in urban Guatemala, increasing the standards of teaching would be a great step to foster a great educational system. According to the Council of Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), improving the quality of education is the only means to decrease the amount of violence. The government of Guatemala should implement a program to educate teachers on

the material they teach and finally issue an exam on all of that material and determine a score using a pass/fail method. Any teacher who fails, is not good enough to actually teach the material and must retake the exam. Another solution for creating higher standards of teaching would be to have educators or other volunteers from around the world come into Guatemala and help teach young children and their teachers understand different concepts. This method would include extremely qualified individuals such as doctors, professors, secondary school teachers as well as primary school teachers. Even involving students who have successfully graduated from local schools would make a huge difference in shaping the youth of society. Students volunteering as mentors would inspire others to take actions in the community and also these students would act as good role models and be good community leaders. Solving the teacher quality problem will decrease the amount of crime in urban Guatemala because students will receive a quality education and therefore stay out of a life of crime because they are doing better.

Additionally, solving the gender gaps can lead to better educational prospects for women. Like many other successful countries, grants should be given to women to pursue their education. It is shown that empowering women through education creates respect for women and increases male students' regard for women's rights ("Human Rights in Guatemala-Avivara Report"). A solution to solving gender bias would be implementing a governance education that teaches students about rights that all students of Guatemala have as well as how to become self sufficient in both rural and urban areas. This is imperative because citizens of Guatemala should know how to take matters into their own hands if there is a legal issue or if they have gotten themselves into trouble. This curriculum would also implement education about women's rights and how women see Guatemalan society. If implemented, the gender gap would start to close at an extremely fast pace. With increasing number of people earning a livelihood, the poverty rate would eventually decline.

In addition to these delineated solutions, additional help from grassroots organizations would help to bolster the educational system in Guatemala. In my opinion, the incentive should come from the locals otherwise, the quality of education in Guatemala will still be the same if no one has the desire to develop a smarter generation. If local philanthropists like Ann Campana, who helps indigenous children get access to food and water, contribute to this cause then the rate of success of education will be greater thus improving the lives of the impoverished. Incentives should also be given to current students to support the younger generation and pathway programs can be created by encouraging more people to join hands. A perfect example of this is depicted by the measures taken by NAAM foundation in helping famine-struck regions of Maharashtra, India. Rural farmers in this region were helpless and due to extreme conditions committed suicide in 2015. A couple celebrities in Maharashtra, India: Nana Patekar and Makarand Anaspure took charge and started to help out the widows and families of the deceased farmers by helping with some funds, by providing educational opportunities to others and by providing training related to farming techniques to the rest of the community (NAAM). If locals lend their hands, they can make a massive difference in educating the masses and helping build a strong community.

### **Relating my experience as a student/volunteer in Guatemala:**

This summer (2018), I attended a two-week camp of Global Public Service Academy and had an opportunity to stay in a rural village in Guatemala called San Mateo. It was near a town called Xela. I stayed with a host family and I learned what it was like to experience life in Guatemala. It was rough. No one spoke English, so I had to communicate in Spanish and their schools seemed very underprivileged. I had an opportunity to work in the medical clinics and host health fairs in extremely rural areas of Guatemala. At each clinic, there were several malnourished children as their staples are rice, beans, and tortillas. I noticed women in rural areas rarely went to school and most had children at the age of 15 or 16.

As a teenager living in the United States, it was extremely hard to imagine having a child when I would be around their age. This made parts of my visit extremely difficult, but it also made me realize how much the citizens of Guatemala could truly benefit from the solutions I had provided. Most people in Guatemala do not receive a good education and education controls many different aspects of our lives. This is why learning is critical to a nation. It creates peace, equality, and solves hunger and malnutrition. Going to Guatemala was an eye-opening experience for me as I had never truly seen so much poverty, malnutrition, or economic downfall in a country. My experience also opened my eyes to how we have an obligation to help others.

### **Conclusion:**

Using one solution to solve the education crisis in Guatemala is impractical because there are diverse problems in rural and urban areas. Therefore, breaking down the problems is essential to solving the lack of education for people. We have analyzed all the monstrous problems in Guatemala. Solving for the lack of education is the best solution. Adopting new farming curriculums and building combined primary and secondary schools in rural areas in Guatemala is critical to encourage higher enrollment rates and increase the economy through agriculture and creating more jobs. Testing teachers abilities and educating them on what they will teach ensures the quality of education for students. Crime and violence rates in urban Guatemala will eventually subside because quality of education is linked to the rate of crime. Inequality will be solved by empowering women through their education and installing a curriculum about governance and women's rights. The power of these solutions to build a good educational framework should come from locals, students and government officials. Thus concluding with the words of Nelson Mandela:

“Safety and security don’t just happen: they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in any society - a life free from violence and fear.”

### Works Cited

“About Us.” *Naam Foundation*, N.p., n.d. <https://www.naammh.org/about-us/>. Accessed 10 Jul. 2018.

"Avivara Affiliate Programs." *Avivara*. N.p., n.d. <http://www.avivara.org/programs/affiliateprograms.html>. Accessed 05 Mar. 2018.

COHA<sup>1</sup>. "Improving the Education System in Guatemala Is the Only Answer to Violent Crime." *COHA*. N.p., 15 Feb. 2012. <http://www.coha.org/improving-the-education-system-in-guatemala-is-the-only-answer-to-violent-crime/>. Accessed 05 Mar. 2018.

COHA<sup>2</sup>. "Guatemala's Crippled Peace Process: A Look Back on the 1996 Peace Accords." *COHA*. N.p., 10 May 2011. <http://www.coha.org/guatemalas-crippled-peace-process-a-look-back-on-the-1996-peace-accords/>. Accessed 05 Mar. 2018.

"Education." *U.S. Agency for International Development*. N.p., 11 Dec. 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/guatemala/education> Accessed 04 Mar. 2018.

- "Good Rural Governance." *Sehgal Foundation*. N.p., 06 Mar. 2018.  
<http://www.smsfoundation.org/good-rural-governance>. Accessed 09 Mar. 2018.
- "Guatemala: Population." *CultureGrams Online Edition*, ProQuest, 2018,  
[online.culturegrams.com/world/world\\_country\\_sections.php?cid=65&cn=&sname=Population&snid=3](http://online.culturegrams.com/world/world_country_sections.php?cid=65&cn=&sname=Population&snid=3). Accessed 04 Mar. 2018.
- "Guatemala - Working Conditions." *Encyclopedia of the Nations*, N.p., n.d.  
[www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Americas/Guatemala-WORKING-CONDITIONS.html](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Americas/Guatemala-WORKING-CONDITIONS.html). Accessed 05 Mar. 2018
- "Human Rights in Guatemala-Avivara Report." *Avivara*. N.p., n.d.  
<http://www.avivara.org/aboutguatemala/humanrightssinguatemala.html>. Accessed 06 Mar. 2018.
- Immink, M.D. C., and J. A. Alarcón. "Can Maize and Beans save the Day?" *Household Food Security and Crop Diversification among Smallholder Farmers in Guatemala*. N.p., n.d.  
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/U8050T/U8050T06.HTM>. Accessed 05 Mar. 2018
- Melville, Kathleen. "Confronting Femicide in Guatemala." *Upside Down World*. N.p., 06 Sept. 2007. <http://upside-downworld.org/archives/guatemala/confronting-femicide-in-guatemala/>. Accessed 07 Mar. 2018.
- NCES. "Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, School Districts, Revenues, and Expenditures: School Year 2004–05 and Fiscal Year 2004 - Number of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in the United States and Other Jurisdictions with Membership, by Type of School and State or Jurisdiction, and Number and Percentage of Students in Charter, Magnet, Title I Eligible, and Title I Schoolwide Schools, by State or Jurisdiction: School Year 2004–05." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. N.p., 2007. [https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/overview04/tables/table\\_2.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/overview04/tables/table_2.asp). Accessed 18 Mar. 2018.
- "State of Education in Guatemala." *Global Education Fund*. N.p., n.d.  
<http://www.globaleducationfund.org/guatemala>. Accessed 08 Mar. 2018.
- "Statistics." *UNICEF*. 26 Dec. 2013.  
[https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala\\_statistics.html](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala_statistics.html). Accessed 09 Mar. 2018.
- "Urban Population (% of Total)." *Urban Population (% of Total) | Data*. N.p., n.d.  
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>. Accessed 05 Mar. 2018.

