

Josephine Rose
Urbandale High School
Urbandale, IA, USA
Guatemala, Malnutrition

Guatemala: A Multi-Step Approach For The Entire Population Guatemala is known for being a scenic country with many tourist attractions. It has fascinating architecture, intricate hiking opportunities, and an incredible volcanic landscape. Under the surface however, Guatemala is ranked 10th in the world for malnutrition (Nag). This is in part due to its climate, which is tremendously unpredictable. The solution to stopping malnutrition in Guatemala is multi-step and will need to involve many parties.

Guatemala is the largest Central American country with a population of 17.56 million (“Guatemala- Total Population”). It is also important to note that Guatemala has one of the highest poverty levels in the world, with 59.3% of its population living in poverty (Gargiulo). This almost precisely mirrors another statistic, Guatemala’s rural versus urban population. The country is split almost evenly between urban life and rural residence, with a slight majority towards living in cities (“Guatemala Population (2020)”). A third sum that is eerily similar in numbers to both of the previously stated facts is the indigenous population to non-indigenous people. This number is also close to 60%. After further research in comparing these figures, about eight in ten indigenous people are poor. This rate is significantly higher than the non-indigenous poverty rate, which is four in ten people living under the poverty line (Valladares). This matters because these rates are not coincidences. In Guatemala, the indigenous rural Mayan people are commonly excluded from politics and culture, mostly due to where they reside and a language barrier. This leaves them out of the opportunity to economically grow, and receive financial support from the United Nations (“Guatemala- Minority Rights Group”).

Guatemalan politics have become increasingly more modern in recent years. The country has a history of militarily led dictatorships, only narrowly escaping the corrupt power structure in the 1950s (“Guatemala Profile- Timeline”). They now have a democratic republic system, where suffrage is gained at age 18. The government still has a long way to go however, being that it has a reputation of being incredibly fraudulent towards its citizens (“Guatemala Corruption Report”).

Unfortunately, Guatemala is extremely susceptible to natural disasters due to its geographical location. Hurricanes and flash floods are common to the country, which devastate both the indigenous and non-indigenous people (Griffith). Worst of all, droughts are common in Guatemala. These droughts shrivel crops and leave people with no income or way to feed their families (Steffens). Most Guatemalans also only have a farm size consisting of a few acres (Niezen). These farms do not produce enough crops to export for extra money, and the people who run these types of farms typically only participate in subsistence farming. Droughts are especially damaging to these families. The crops that are typically grown on these farms are bananas, sugarcane, and coffee (“Guatemala- Agriculture”).

The Guatemalan family structure differs slightly between indigenous Mayan people and non-indigenous

people. In cities, women typically marry by age 20, and usually without a large wedding ceremony. These women tend to work outside the home, bringing in a second source of income for their families (“Guatemalan Way of Life”). The average wage for a worker in these areas is equivalent to about \$400 a month (Stotz). In rural areas, life is more traditional. The volcanic soil of the highlands is particularly good for crops, therefore most Mayan families will grow food for their families. They tend to speak the Mayan dialect, if any Spanish, and tend to dress in traditional Mayan clothing. Mayan women may work, but rarely outside the home. If they are making a second source of income for their family, it is common for them to weave, embroider, or sell produce at markets. These women are also responsible for traditional women's roles, such as the education of children, childrearing, cooking, and religious duties. Their husbands will typically spend all day tending to their small farm. It is not common for these families to have internet access like urban dwellers do (“Guatemalan Way of Life”). One thing that unites both ways of life, however, is a passion for sports and family closeness. Guatemalans are known to care immensely about fútbol and it unites the country, indigenous or not. Another common factor between these two distinct groups is close family ties between members of the family. It is always important for a Guatemalan family to eat meals together and to pray together. It is not common to travel in Guatemala, for this reason for missing the rest of one’s family (Kavulla).

Guatemala also has a particularly conservative view regarding women and reproductive health. “Twenty-two percent of women aged 15–19, and 60% of women aged 20–24, have been married” (“Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Women in Guatemala”). This creates a norm for women where it is expected to have children at an early age. When women are not fiscally ready to have children it creates a vicious cycle where the new mother will stay in poverty. Her children will then grow up to be malnourished and most likely uneducated as they will have to provide money for the family on the farm. Then once again, due to the cultural norms regarding women and children, the cycle continues as the next generation of Guatemalan children will be born before the mother can financially support them. This cycle can only be broken when the cultural norm is broken as well.

Guatemalan women also have lower rates of sexual education. “The proportion of women aged 15–24 with comprehensive knowledge of HIV/ AIDS is higher in urban areas than in rural areas (32% vs. 14%). Among the poorest women, the proportion with comprehensive knowledge is only 5%” (“Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Women in Guatemala”). While even in more urban areas, that statistic still is not proficient. This leaves less than 1/3 of the population knowledgeable about diseases that will impact both the mother in addition to her children. For whatever reason, it is seen as taboo to educate women on sexual matters. Once again, until some sort of cultural revolution occurs, a vast majority of Guatemalan women will be doomed to the fate of being exposed to HIV/AIDS.

Since 2014, Guatemalan malnutrition rates have spiked. This is mainly due to droughts and natural disasters (Miller). The impact this has on children is severe. Their growth is stunted, along with developing several other health defects that will haunt them later in life. Organizations have tried to help by donating money to try and fix this situation, but nothing seems to be working. This trend is particularly noticeable in rural Mayan areas. This is due to the unpredictable climate wiping out small subsistence farms, leaving families devastated. The plus side of this is that Guatemala has free healthcare for its citizens. They can get their illnesses treated for free and possibly get better. The universal healthcare,

while always available, is not always wanted. Many indigenous people feel uncomfortable going to a hospital in a big city. They feel that their culture is not respected and they have been reported to prefer local spiritual healers instead of hospitals (Petrovick).

There has been much done to try and lessen the severity of this situation. The most successful solution has been from the International Relief Team with USAID. This organization visits Guatemala with cases of “Nutributter” a food spread that can reverse the effects of malnutrition (“Fighting Malnutrition in Guatemala”). This has been helping immensely, especially in rural areas. The only downside is this solution is not necessarily long term. In Peru, another solution was developed. The government allocated much of its budget to improving basic humanitarian needs to improve malnutrition. Peru raised awareness of this issue to other countries, provoking monetary donations (“Guatemala Steps Up in Fighting Malnutrition”). This solution would work well in Guatemala as well, for both the indigenous and non-indigenous people. The only disadvantage is this solution does not work overnight, and people are hungry today.

A successful solution would need to include all people in the country, both indigenous and not. A country that is divided in this way will not be successful unless it unites together. It would also take a complex solution, as many factors need to be considered. At first glance, the obvious solution would be to have the indigenous people sell their goods to bigger markets in cities. This, however, might create cultural tension between the two ethnic groups. A proposed solution would be similar to a farmers market. This would encourage integration between the two groups on a smaller level. They could also sell their goods internationally, even more than they are already. Similar to the International Relief Team’s solution, there would also be supplements provided to citizens to ease malnutrition. For a more long-term solution however, crops that are seen as “subsistence only” crops should be grown at a larger scale to sell to other nations. These crops include wheat, rice, corn, and beans. This would not only stimulate the economy but also provide extra food for families in need. Finally, the government of Guatemala can not sit idly any longer. Similar to Peru, the government needs to be budgeted to allow for aid for farmers. This being that a drought or a flood is devastating to farm families and a government subsidy could help with feeding a family.

In addition to these three major things, more international awareness could bring in the country much-needed donations. Advertising Guatemala as a tourist spot can bring in extra revenue as well. To Guatemalan citizens, new international jobs can be implemented, such as in call centers or factories. This could also help modernize the country, as only the non-indigenous people have access to the internet. This much needed integration between the country’s ethnic groups will also help unite the Guatemala. Lastly, it would be smart to integrate women into society. There is still a gender bias for what jobs each gender can hold, and it is damaging to Guatemalan society. This problem is especially prevalent with the indigenous population. This cultural update would have all Guatemalans working toward a common goal, not just the male half. At first, this may seem culturally insensitive, as the Mayans do not believe in women working outside the home. This change would be for the better though, as it would benefit not only the indigenous people, but all of Guatemala as a whole.

This multi-step solution is important because even if one factor were to fail, there are still several other parts of the plan to keep up with. For example, if there is a natural disaster that wipes out crop production, the government can still provide subsidies to its citizens, along with relief missions can still be carried out. This project will need to be funded based on donations from citizens in other countries, but mostly from the Guatemalan government. There would also need to be an organization in charge of overseeing this operation. The United Nations seems like an obvious choice for this, as they have helped other nations in the past.

The solution to helping Guatemala fix its malnutrition is incredibly complex. However, complex problems like this require complex solutions. There is also no time to waste, as children are dying of malnutrition every day. Guatemalan families need help, and if a country or organization has the wealth to do so, why not start now?

Works
Cited

“Fighting Malnutrition in Guatemala.” *International Relief Teams*, 19 July 2017,

www.irteams.org/post/fighting-malnutrition-in-guatemala. Gargiulo, Anna.
“Current Poverty Rate in Guatemala.” *The Borgen Project*, Borgen Project

https://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.Jpg, 21 Aug. 2019, borgenproject.org/exploring-poverty-rate-in-guatemala/.

“Guatemala Corruption Report.” *Business Anti Corruption Portal*, GAN Integrity, Aug. 2016, www.ganintegrity.com/portal/country-profiles/guatemala/. “Guatemala Population (LIVE).” *Worldometer*, Worldometer.org, 30 Mar. 2020, www.worldometers.info/world-population/guatemala-population/.

“Guatemala Population, 1960-2019.” *Knoema*, World Data Atlas, June 2019, knoema.com/atlas/Guatemala/Population. “Guatemala Profile - Timeline.” *BBC News*, BBC, 29 July 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19636725. “Guatemala.” *Minority Rights Group*, Jan. 2019, minorityrights.org/country/guatemala/. “Guatemalan Way of Life in Guatemala.” *Lonely Planet*, 2019, www.lonelyplanet.com/guatemala/background/other-features/baca9fdf-55c5-4970-8c3d-80ecf5e27259/a/nar/baca9fdf-55c5-4970-8c3d-80ecf5e27259/358403. “Guatemala's Government Structure & Economy.” *Guatemala's Government Structure & Economy*, Trust Pilot, 12 Feb. 2020, www.anywhere.com/guatemala/travel-guide/government-and-economy. Horst, Oscar H., and Thomas P. Anderson. “Climate.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 24 Mar. 2020, www.britannica.com/place/Guatemala/Climate.

Kavulla, Katie. “Six Months in Central America.” *SheKnows*, 11 July 2018, www.sheknows.com/parenting/articles/956309/life-in-guatemala/. Nag, Oishimaya Sen. “Most Malnourished Countries In The World.” *WorldAtlas*, WorldAtlas, 10 Mar. 2016, www.worldatlas.com/articles/most-malnourished-countries-in-the-world.html. Niezen, Cecilia. “Farmers Struggle For Land in Guatemala.” *Oxfam*, 19 Feb. 2020, www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/farmers-struggle-for-land-in-guatemala/. Petrovick, Tatiana. “Five Reasons Why the Guatemalan Health System Is in Deep Crisis.” *Mayan Families*, 2 Feb. 2019, www.mayanfamilies.org/blogs/entry/3594. “Sexual and Reproductive Health Of Young Women in Guatemala.” *Guttmacher Institute*, 27 July 2016, www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/sexual-and-reproductive-health-young-women-guatemala. Steffens, Gena. “Changing Climate Forces Desperate Guatemalans to Migrate.” *National Geographic*, 6 Dec. 2018, www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/10/drought-climate-change-force-guatemalans-migrate-to-us/. Stotz, Jon, et al. “Average and Minimum Salary in Guatemala.” *Check in Price*, 24 July 2019, checkinprice.com/average-and-minimum-salary-in-guatemala/. Valladrares, Daniel. “GUATEMALA: Forgotten Promises Leave Indigenous Peoples Poorer and Hungrier.” *GUATEMALA: Forgotten Promises Leave Indigenous Peoples Poorer and Hungrier*.

Hungrier | *Inter Press Service*, International Press Service, 19 July 2019,
www.ipsnews.net/2010/12/guatemala-forgotten-promises-leave-indigenous-peoples-poorer-and-hungrier/.

van Trotsenberg, Axel, and Prensa Libre. "Guatemala Steps Up Fight against Malnutrition." *World Bank*,

World Bank Group, 20 May 2019,
www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2019/05/20/guatemala-intensifica-la-lucha-contra-la-desnutricion.

Wilson, Dave. "Guatemala." *OECD*, Mar. 2019,
oec.world/en/profile/country/gtm/.