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Honduras, Sustainable Agriculture

## **Honduras**

Bananas for many Americans are nothing more than a quick snack, but in Honduras, one of the “Banana Republics” of the world, they are a meager, and failing means of survival for its citizens. Massive issues have been plaguing Honduras since the country's birth, and they are continuing to pile up. Poverty, crime, food insecurity, lack of clean water, and extremely outdated agricultural practices degrading arable land are all problems that are keeping Honduras as the second poorest country in Central America. However, turning around and innovating the country's agricultural sector may be just the kickstart that the country and its citizens need to begin making positive change for the future.

The Republic of Honduras, once a part of the Spanish Empire, became its own independent country in the year 1821. The nation was under military rule for approximately 25 years before an elected government made up of citizens came into power in 1982. Honduras currently has a presidential republic in place for their government (“Central Intelligence”). Between the years of 1821 and 1982, the constitution was rewritten 17 times. Even with all of the change to original law, legislative power has been exchanged by non-democratic and violent means (“Honduras”).

Honduras is located between Guatemala and Nicaragua and bordered by the Caribbean Sea in the north. Approximately 9,346,277 citizens call this country their home, giving it a similar population to the state of Georgia. Honduras has a land area of 112,090 square kilometers. This makes it very close to the size of the state of Pennsylvania, for reference, as it has a land area of 116,075 square kilometers (“Size of Honduras”). Of the country's population, 58.4 percent of the population lives in an urban area, leaving the other 41.6 percent of the population living very different lives in a rural area (“Central Intelligence”). Most of the urban population lives in the nation's capital Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula. The rest of Honduras's citizens live a more isolated life in a rural setting due to the country's mountainous geography. A severe to complete lack of roads, electricity, clean water, and the jagged terrain only adds to the isolation of their communities (“Honduras”).

Close knit families are standard in Honduras's culture. Normally having two to three children in each family, rural families will often have many more children than that. Children do not normally move out until they are married, and in many cases, some couples still live with their families after the fact. There are normally an average of ten family members living in one household as it is not uncommon for grandparents and other relatives to be together (“AFS-USA”). While strong family ties are the norm, due to the amount of poverty and low standard of living, life for these family members, especially the children, is a struggle. It is estimated that approximately 150,000 orphans live in Honduras. Adolescents of the nation also face a high suicide rate and a large drug problem. Due to the lack of orphanages, 90 percent of these orphans live on the street, and due to the price of food, fight off hunger by inhaling shoe glue which is highly toxic and many children die by the age of 18. Journalists and human rights defenders who investigate these issues are often arrested or killed, and the government does not look into the problems themselves (“Children of Honduras”).

Education systems in developing countries are often severely underfunded and in some cases ineffective; in Honduras it is no different. Schools are inadequate, have few teachers, no textbooks, and school hours are short (“Honduras”). The primary level of education is free for all children, but few attend as 45 percent of the nation's children who should be enrolled in highschool do not go (“Thorpe, Devin”). Due to the amount of poverty and lack of clean water, many families need their children to fetch water or work to

afford enough food to survive instead of going to school. These problems have culminated in a staggering illiteracy rate of one fourth of the population over 15 years old (“Children of Honduras”)

Many of the nation's problems root from the relief of the land, which has held back the country and kept it from progressing more quickly. Approximately three fourths of the country is made of mountainous terrain. This causes many problems for locals, especially in rural communities, as transportation is made difficult, and land is hard to grow food on. The climate is generally hot and humid for the majority of the year. Lowlands average 79 to 82 degrees year round, while the more mountainous regions of the country have a mean temperature of about 69 degrees. With the tropical climate the country has and being on the coast, this puts them at risk of severe tropical storms and hurricanes (“Honduras”). The most serious of these storms was in 1998, with Hurricane Mitch. As an already poor country, this large storm completely wreaked havoc on the struggling nation and set them back many years in the progress of development.

Poverty is the norm across this tropical nation as extremely little economic success has ever been found in its history. According to the World Bank, the threshold for extreme poverty is anyone living on less than or equal to \$1.90 a day. Honduras’s population of 9.3 million people currently has 60 percent of its citizens living on about two dollars a day. This widespread poverty is the cause of many extreme issues for its citizens that decrease the quality of life. Clean water and basic sanitation is severely lacking as 23 percent of the population in rural areas, or about 600,000 people, do not have access to drinking water (“Children of Honduras”). Food insecurity is also a common issue as more people struggle to afford food for themselves and their families compared to those who do not (Thorpe, Devin). There is extremely unequal wealth distribution throughout the nation, high unemployment, and there are few quality jobs that pay well enough to support a family (“Central Intelligence”). However, this unemployment issue is not due to unwillingness of workers as hundreds of people will line up just to interview for a minimum wage position right when it opens up (Thorpe, Devin).

Boosting Honduras’s small economy could have massive impacts for the welfare of the nation's citizens and start to improve many of the country’s issues. Agriculture currently makes up for only 13 percent of Honduras's gross domestic product, but employs one third of the population (“New Agriculturist”). The rest of the GDP is made up of about 29 percent industry, and the other 57 percent is filled in with services. This large fraction of the employment in agriculture is partly due to the number of subsistence farmers that have to grow food, mainly maize and beans, to survive (“New Agriculturist”). Just under 29 percent of the nation's land is suitable for agriculture, but the majority of it, 16 percent, is in permanent pasture ground (“Central Intelligence”). This arable land is hard to obtain for subsistence farms as the lowlands that contain the country's fertile soil are dominated by plantations (“New Agriculturist”).

Two major crops that keep Honduras going are coffee and bananas with 35 percent of all products they export going to the United States. Due to a tropical climate that is perfect for growing the fruit and cheap labor, the two companies, Dole and Chiquita, have near complete control over the banana industry in Honduras (“New Agriculturist”). While these companies have made up a major part of the country's exports for much of the country's history, they have not had a very positive impact on its people, or land. When banana production was at its peak the environment suffered intensely. Much of the ecosystem's biodiversity was wiped out, swampy areas filled in, and forests were cleared, all to be replaced for the fragile monocrop plantations (Musili, Brian Kasyoka). In 2005, Hondurans were a part of a multinational lawsuit against these companies because of their usage of pesticides which had been banned since 1979, in the United States. Holding these companies accountable can have positive effects on workers, but it also leads to the possibility that these companies the country relies on will leave in search of cheaper labor (“New Agriculturist”).

Honduras’s history, and a large portion of Central America alike, have been intertwined deeply with these American corporations. This history has made it very difficult for the country to decrease their

dependence on these companies. Two major players were working in Central America starting around the year 1910 ("United Fruit Company"). The United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company initially received massive swaths of land along Honduras's north coast to make a transcontinental type railroad that the government hoped would propel Honduras's infrastructure closer to developed countries. Once the land was cleared and the rails were built, plantations were put into place to begin growing bananas for sale. These companies began to rule Honduras from the 1920's up until the 1970's. The massive amounts of land that were allotted, plus huge tax breaks led to incredible growth ("Dupuis, John"). The companies ended up building the majority of the infrastructure. It is thought that this development by the United Fruit Company led to an increase in the quality of life for its citizens but it gave the corporation an unprecedented amount of power and led it close to being a monopoly along with Standard Fruit. The companies started to resist the government building their own roads because that would take business away from the only company-built railroads that were making them money ("Musili, Brian Kasyoka"). There were many labor strikes against the company but the biggest in Honduras began in 1954. Workers on the plantations from both companies went on strike demanding higher wages. Eventually the strike consisted of 25,000 workers which is about 15% of the labor force at that time. Banana operations were slammed to stop immediately, Standard Fruit Company would negotiate, United would not. After thirteen days Standard Fruit company was back running after workers wages were increased. It was not until 57 days later that the United Fruit strike ended. Workers received a 21% wage and medical care for their families, they were asking for 72%. Later that year a hurricane hit Honduras and 10,000 United workers were fired. United Fruit Company is now known as Chiquita Brands International, and Standard became the Dole Fruit Company ("United Fruit Company").

The rights of the laborers on Honduras's banana plantations have come a long way from the past, but there is still tension between the company and the general population. Most recently, in 2019 in protests against the president Juan Orlando Hernandez, 30 Dole food trucks were set on fire and the products were stolen, along with the gate to the US Embassy being set alight. The protests started due to the president changing the rules to increase his term in office. Close to this time period it was said that Dole was planning to increase its operation size, adding thousands of jobs. The company was planning on acquiring approximately 5000 more acres of land, but it is unsure if that led to the attacks on the company ("Maxwell, Maura").

The first step to finding independence from these massive corporations is to decrease the nation's dependence on its large export crop of bananas. While definite strides have been made in this regard since the 1920's when 90 percent of exports were made from bananas there is still more work that needs to be done. Decreasing dependence on these sole cash crops will make the ag sector less vulnerable to financial and environmental changes ("New Agriculturist"). This can not be done without the continued support from the United States government. In 2015, the U.S. and Honduras put in place a plan to help increase their levels of sustainable agriculture. The United States gave Honduras 17 million dollars in agricultural products, so the government could have money to start building their agricultural sector for people in vulnerable positions, like subsistence farmers. This extra capital towards their agricultural sector will give Honduras the chance to improve their practices, so they can grow food more efficiently and sustainably ("Project, Borgen").

Government financial aid is a very common form of support, but it is not an effective form of assistance according to Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton. This economist from Princeton argues that financial forms of foreign aid from governments can have the opposite effect. A study that was conducted in Africa found that the more money that they received, the less growth per capita the communities experienced. Deaton believes this is because it gives the government an unequal power balance over its citizens. Countries that rely on lots of financial foreign aid need less taxes from its people, in turn not needing to supply its citizens with their wants, and needs to maintain control. Many of these countries that need assistance have governments that would rather keep the money for their own needs, which in turn keeps it

from their citizens. However, this does not mean governments help, it just needs to be received in different methods than money supplied to the government of the country in need (“Swanson, Ana”).

Honduras has been receiving aid from the United States in a more project based, “boots on the ground” approach. Many economists that disagree with the more radical ideas of Angus Deaton but agree that there are better solutions than providing governments with money support this form of assistance. (“Swanson, Ana”). My father, Travis Fleshner, was mobilized with the 389 Engineer Bravo Company to Honduras, 1993, 1996, and 1998 for three weeks at a time for remote construction operations. While there his unit was tasked with constructing school buildings and medical centers in remote areas. Stationed with approximately 150 soldiers were medical support staff that could administer care to the inhabitants of the remote areas that they were working in. The United States were also sponsoring many other humanitarian projects in Honduras including well drilling. This gave the remote citizens easier access to clean water, and in some buildings, running water for the first time. This project based, hands on approach gave the United States better control over where the funds they were giving to the country were going. My father told me that all of the citizens' interactions with the troops in Honduras were very positive, and they were happy for the assistance from the United States in this fashion.

While certain types foreign aid from governments help, support from nonprofits out of the private sector can be significantly more effective and efficient. There are several of these groups working to make Honduras a better country for its citizens, specifically by helping the agricultural sector. Technoserve is an organization that aims to help farmers in developing countries by teaching them how to more effectively grow their food. This in turn increases rural farmers' incomes and increases the nation's food security (“Technoserve”). A current project that is being worked on has the end goal of increasing the economic well-being of small scale coffee farmers. This happens by giving the farmers access to more funds to get their operation running more efficiently and sustainably, and it introduces them to new technologies and techniques for growing their crop (“Technoserve”).

Other organizations are also working to help rebuild the agricultural sector to make it more sustainable for the land and its workers. Heifer International has been providing small farm families with animals including dairy goats, sheep and chickens. They also teach the farmers about animal health and wellbeing, and provide materials to build shelters for the provided animals. On top of this they supplement the income for families that are at the highest rates of poverty to get them to a more livable wage or \$2.57 a day. By working with farmers that focus on livestock, coffee, and grain production they are helping create privately owned farms that benefit the workers, and citizens of the country, not large scale CEO's. Having these farms decreases dependency on corporations, gives more diverse agricultural businesses to the country, and increases the population's nutrition. Heifer International since the start of the work in 1978 have assisted 565,000 families (“Heifer International”).

The simplest form of aid that can be given to a country in need, and one that would be very effective for Honduras, is aid that anyone can give. There are several ways that anyone can assist these organizations. If there is a headquarters of a non profit organization that is working in Honduras that is local, it is possible to volunteer to assist the work that is happening there. If that is not possible, helping fund these groups in several ways can help expand the scope of work that can be done. The simplest form of supporting a country is by being an advocate in your community (“Heifer International”) By letting those around you know about the problems going on in Honduras more people will be aware, and that is the baseline for change in the community.

Through project based government aid and assistance from several private organizations, the agricultural sector is slowly improving. If the assistance continues and farmers spread the knowledge and new techniques they learn to others, progress will increase immensely. Making Honduras's agricultural market dependent on strong, knowledgeable, independent, and sustainable farm communities that grow a variety

of crops, instead of monocrop corporations, will give the nation the ability to push themselves out of poverty. This in turn will give all Hondurans a better quality of life and boost the nation towards a state of development.

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