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Costa Rica: Empowering Self-Sufficiency Through Education

Costa Rica; the land of eco friendly resorts, cacao, coffee, and the most magnificent scenery. A great place to escape from reality and reconnect with nature. But it's what we don't see that's the major problem in Costa Rica's society, poverty. Although one of the most affluent Central American countries the disparity between socioeconomic classes is drastic. Poverty percentage has gone up by 1.1% since 2017, that means that 1,142,069 people live in poverty, and 360,783 people live in extreme poverty (1). Costa Rica has the resources to keep the natives striving, it's the fact that the most vulnerable people can't afford the resources that causes a problem.

The geography of Costa Rica is extremely diverse. The country's area is 19,730 square miles (5). It ranges from three types of forests (dry, cloud, and rain) to estuaries, and ocean surrounding a lot of the country. With all this diverse land available, they don't have any military to guard it. Their military was abolished in 1948. The country itself is democratically based with free healthcare to all. Basic education is free as well as social services. Costa Rica is heavily based around religion, especially Catholicism. They are very diverse as a country in many different areas.

The average Costa Rican family and lifestyle solely depends on where you are from. Family life in Costa Rica is based on what class of society they belong to. The people with money are able to live a lavish lifestyle. The men can have a primary family and children, as well as a mistress and more children with that woman. As you move down the social class pyramid you see a lot less money available to families. The people with little to no money live in multi-generational households in villages surrounded by relatives. These families consist of children, mothers, fathers, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, and more. The average age of marriage is twenty-one for females and twenty-four for males (7). Children are sacred in their culture and are thought highly upon. Children also stay at home until into their twenties where they either go to further their education, or get married to have more children (2). Each option depends on what social class you come from. The wealthy are able to obtain greater education, while the less fortunate marry and have children of their own.

Free education doesn't mean equal educational opportunities. Depending on where the school is located determines a lot of important factors when it comes to the future rates of poverty in Costa Rica. The more affluent people send their children to private schools, while the rest of the children attend free public schools, if they choose to attend school at all. When you compare the capital of Costa Rica; San Jose's percentage of people that have gone on for further education (31%) versus rural Liberia (14%) the percentage is almost cut in half(cite). More affluent residents of San Jose also have access to private schools affording them more opportunities for a better education. The schools in smaller, rural areas are only taught basic literacy by ill-equipped teachers, with little to no resources. The children that cause disruptions are sent to teachers that don't know how to properly handle them, which in the end leads to a higher percentage of dropouts or physical violence within the school (4). A worker who has a highschool

diploma can earn 23.5% more than a worker of the same job without a highschool diploma(8). With this lack of education, the location of housing in Costa Rica, and inability to obtain or keep a job, the poverty in smaller, rural communities continues to grow.

One way to empower multi-generational, women led households is to teach them how to create new sources of income. This past summer I was fortunate enough to travel to Costa Rica on a school science trip. While there I was able to experience the beauty as well as the poverty of this country. One of our days was devoted to helping the women of the village develop a source of income for their families. The income source we helped the villagers with were butterflies. Costa Rica is home to 1,200 types of butterflies that can be used to attract tourism (6). Strong female head of households that are able to communicate in English will manage this project, because those in charge, need to be greatly respected by the villagers. The local women had already begun to set up the "mariposario" or butterfly house. The butterfly house was initially partially funded by a private organization, Seeds of Change, but will become self funded as it grows. When we arrived on site, we were able to see what needed to be taught and accomplished to make this an excellent source of income for this village. We had the local women divide up amongst our experts based upon their role in the butterfly house. The women were taught how to catch more butterflies when the ones die, raise caterpillars, feed the butterflies, and keep the area looking nice for tourists. As another source of income, the women made bracelets to sell to tourists as souvenirs. With their previous knowledge in making bracelets, they were able to make money with little effort, all the while doing something they enjoyed. Through education and native resources, the village was able to come up with a source of income, that overtime would grow to help the people that live there. This added income would allow the women of this village to purchase more nutritious options for food and potentially enable their children to attend higher education with these additional resources. The community would be able to see the benefits that the mariposario brought to their village and it would open more job opportunities for them as well.

Another path that the citizens of Costa Rica can bring forth, is utilizing the geography to their advantage. With all the vast and beautiful scenery that this country has, it is by far one of the main reasons tourists travel there(11). Depending on the location these people live in, is the type of tours that they can put out on the market. The families that live near one of the many rain forests can use the wildlife and plants to their success. Due to the fact that most of them have lived in that area for their entire lives, they can show tourists a safe tour and walk through that part of Costa Rica. These families can advertise with signs that can be easily made out of wood and write it in their own language since tourists will almost always be with a translator. As more people come around, the more connections these families have, then leading them into a higher income overtime. The same would go for the Costa Ricans that live in the mountainous landscapes, around bodies of water, or even closer to the city life of the country.

A different route that these indigionous people could start with, would be animal watchings. Costa Rica is home to more than 500,000 species of animals, one including turtles(10). There are four different species of turtles that call this country their home. The people and women that live closer to the ocean can use this sea creature as a source of income. Many tourists come to Costa Rica to see the egg hatching on the beaches and most that do watch, don't know the right way to do it. These native people know the correct light to use for these sensitive creatures as the venture out to sea (red light) and how far back you should

be from the hatchlings. But the tourists could pose a danger to these animals without the proper instruction. The community set up a small business in their town advertising for turtle watching. Over a few nesting seasons and word by mouth, these little shops could become huge. Especially to those tourists that have a soft spot in them for protecting wild animals. Also with these four different turtle species comes different nesting and hatching times throughout the year, so the families have a pretty consistent source of income that overtime could really hold true.

Focusing more on a small business sense of income would be using the god given gifts that these villages have. Lots of these women from these communities have talents that can be used as an advantage for their families. One of the ideas that I was exposed to when I took the trip down there was making bracelets. The women from this town had already possessed the knowledge when it came to making this jewelry and could also use the help from their kids to make them as well. This added to more products being made without needing to pay extra workers for the help. These women could also make trinkets out of shells that are found on beaches near their homes, sew together headbands or hair clips using recycled materials so therefore deeming it eco-friendly, or even putting together a thrift store with upcycled items. Another way these women could easily create an income through a small business would be through art. Wood carving is one form of art that is popular in Costa Rica. They have many different types of wood there that could be sold at different values depending on the supply and demand. Stone statues or statues made out of other materials are another form of art that is very popular in this country. If these community members already possess these talents, then they should put them to good use, and make money off of it as well.

A final way that these community members could come up with a source of income would be through family restaurants. During my trip to Costa Rica, we visited a family's restaurant and learned how to cook authentic Costa Rican cuisine. This family was known by many organizations and hosted a lot of different tours or cooking classes with people that were interested in the meals they eat. By holding these cooking classes, the women of the community are able to cook their families meals, but they also have a garden for the families that live there. The restaurant uses the homegrown produce to make their meals sound very appealing to outsiders, as well as being a very healthy alternative to the food that these kids would otherwise be eating. These restaurants would be a great source of income for the entire community and their future generations.

Now when it comes to funding all these different income bearing scenarios, there are quite a few places to look. One area that Costa Rica is very heavily involved in, is their religion. While in Costa Rica, we saw a huge number of places of worship for the native people and the tourists to praise their god. It seemed as if every town had at least two churches or more in some cases. With the entire town going to worship twice a week, its blatantly obvious that these churches depend on their attendees to keep themselves striving. The main message from most religions is to help out others in need, so when all is said and done, the attendees of these churches really need help. If these church leaders want the next generation of their congregation to continue to go to church in their town, there needs to be a way to keep them in the area. If these churches were exposed to certain groups that we have in America, such as Habitat for Humanity, or others from the same idea, they could really help themselves out in the long run as well as help out their loyal community members. They would only need to acquire a little bit of seed money to start out most of

these small businesses for the families, and with that little bit, a lot can be made from it. This seed money could later help families pay for healthier meals and even further education for their children.

Another way that can help fund this empowerment ordeal is through non-profit organizations. There are many non-profit organizations throughout Costa Rica that are in all sorts of areas. There are groups in the education viewpoint such as ASOBITICO which is fighting to change how the free public school systems are teaching curriculum or Ideas in Action as they are petitioning for children to learn English or even the International Scholarship fund that helps send kids to further education. There are many other areas that these non-profit organizations can help in like wildlife preservation, tourism, small business start ups, women refugee housing, climate change, and helping with the poverty in Costa Rica. There are so many opportunities out there that are willing to help these small rural communities, we just need to connect the pieces.

When it comes to asking the government for money to help the poor parts of their country, its not usually a dependable source. Some of the non-profit organizations mentioned are funded by the Costa Rican government but not many in the slightest. The issue is not that the government doesn't have money because they do. By not having a military, they are able to obtain a good deal of income from all the exported goods. The problem with government funding is where they decide to spend their money. They choose other areas rather than the large quantity of people that are living in poverty without a second glance. So when it comes to the government to support these ideas, its not a realistic outcome.

When given the debate that Americans should help dig itself out of poverty before helping other areas such as Costa Rica, there are a few reasons they should consider helping out this region. One is because Costa Rica sends the majority of its exports to the United States. If we just decide that these people are not worth spending our time and money on, we are looking at a major decrease in goods that Costa Rica provides. Also, the geography and wildlife that Costa Rica is home to, is a really important landmark that the world needs to keep around for as long as possible. It is the forest that houses billions of trees that we need to continue to filter out the Carbon dioxide and convert it into Oxygen. With our insane population at this moment, we need all the trees we can get, as well as natural resources, and the goods that Costa Rica has to offer. Without them, we would all be suffering, and the main people doing the labor are the communities from rural areas that are ridden with poverty.

When these empowering jobs begin to create an income for the families that need it, we will start to see a change in the rural areas that are full of poverty. First, these families will be able to afford better, nutritious food, that will keep the children healthier and help them to stay away from malnourishment or starvation, As these community members start to save the money that they've gained, they can do a few things with it. One being invest it back into the operation. By putting the money to make the business or tourist attraction more appealing to people that come to visit, they are bound to draw more of a crowd and ultimately make more money. Another thing that they can do with the money they earn is to put it towards the community itself. Renovate the primary schools and intermediate schools to better educate the future generations. The families could afford better teachers to help educate their children and even advance the kids to a highschool program that they could afford or build. Finally, they could afford to send their children to higher education. As mentioned previously, opportunities for education is not equal, but by

empowering the community members and women of the towns to come up with a source of income, their children will have the option to further their education. With the newest generation of the community having a much higher price tag on themselves due to this higher education, they will then be able to ultimately make more money than the other family members and support themselves as well as their families. When this educated generation of the community comes back home, they will be able to bring back the ideas and income opportunities to their town. With all this new income the idea of further education will be a thing of the past and just become a reality in the Costa Rican culture.

In summary, empowering the rural impoverished communities with different ways to obtain income, will send children to further education due to the extra money being made. This in turn would benefit the village as those children will return and bring their education and talents back to help their community. Like the saying "If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime". By teaching these villages how to utilize their resources, they'll be able to become self sufficient, and provide for themselves. Finally, this model can be used throughout Costa Rica in different rural areas with unique attributes to bring in tourism, subsidize local income, and further the country as a whole.

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