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Honduras, Illiteracy Rate

Honduras: Declining the Illiteracy Rate

With a history of unfortunate events ranging from natural disasters, military rule, corruption, and beyond-- Honduras has one of the highest rates of poverty in the entire Western Hemisphere. In the beautiful country, there is an astounding population of 9.1 million people. Out of these people, 53.9 percent live in urban areas, while the remaining 46.1 percent live in rural areas. Honduras has a multiparty republic with one legislative house, and the current president of the country is President Juan Orlando Hernández. Much of Honduras's land mass is cultivated and many exports are grown throughout the land. In fact, many of these exports include corn, bananas, coffee beans, tobacco, and sugarcane.

While all of the exports are important, "corn is the chief staple crop." Corn is so vital to the population that "Honduran farmers [...] plant genetically modified corn or GMOs (illegal in the rest of Central America), [in order to help] combat food shortages and rising corn prices" (Britannica). The climate has a fairly large impact on the agricultural side of the economy as the climate is generally unforgivingly hot with very high humidity. Four main geographic regions dissect the country: the eastern Caribbean lowlands, the northern coastal and alluvial plains, the central highlands, and the Pacific lowlands. Each climate has its effects on the people who live in them. Stunting in children under 5 due to malnutrition is prominent- impacting nearly 23 percent of students in some areas and nearly 40 percent of children in what is known as "the dry corridor." It is in this region that a large proportion of the indigenous population lives" (World Food Programme).

Manufacturing is a very large part of Honduras's economy. In the late 20th century, many foreign owned companies, known as *maquiladoras*, moved into the area. These companies make a variety of items from food products, chemicals, and even paper products. The country experienced a rise in the employment rate because these businesses were able to employ as many as 75,000 people. Interestingly, most of those employed were women. Yes, women were gainfully employed in manufacturing and in large numbers due to the poverty in the country. The average living wage of a Honduran family is L9210.00. That wage translates to 377.26 U.S. dollars annually! This wage, compared to the annual income rate of the average American family, shows the living wage in Honduras as the lower percentile of family income rankings nationally. This means that the average family living in Honduras must live-off of only that meager amount of income. The average family consists of four to five people. Because the income is so low, there are many foods that Hondurans are more typical to eat because they are less expensive. There are many comidas típicas (typical foods) that the family eats. Some of these foods are *sopa de hombre* ("man's soup") and *queso con chile* ("cheese with chili peppers"). Many items such as corn, rice, beans, plantains, and cassava are common among these families, whereas meat and green vegetables are not. Education and welfare are also hard to come by.

Education in the country is based on the European model of centralized control through the Ministry of Public Education. "According to law, education is free and, at the primary level, compulsory for all

children” (Britannica). In fact, “Less than half of all children actually complete the full 9 years and less than a third advances to secondary education. Many students drop out after 6th grade. Boys are encouraged to find work, while girls typically go home and help raise younger siblings until they marry early and start families of their own.” (My School). Many efforts have been made to fight illiteracy that affects over one fourth of the population. Higher education can be reached in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, at the National Autonomous University of Honduras. Due to the many strict requirements, most of Honduras’s population does not have a health care plan. Because many people are not employed by businesses, social security does not apply to them, therefore causing the rural areas to have an extremely high death rate due to malnutrition and malaria. “The gap between the wealthy (and even the middle-class) and the poor is pronounced. Impoverished families in rural areas typically live on tiny parcels of land, and urban poor often inhabit cramped, unsanitary rows of dirt-floored rooms called *carterios*” (Britannica).

A major problem that Honduras faces is its extreme rate of illiteracy. According to an article by Manuel Orozco and Marcela Valdivia, “One in ten Hondurans are illiterate, and in rural areas, this increases to two in ten.” That number will only continue to rise unless a solution is brought forth. Although Honduras is one of the only countries in Central America that spends the majority of its budget on education, it still shows little performance on improving the lives of the Honduran citizens. “The challenges that it faces are formidable, and include addressing illiteracy among rural populations, improving access to secondary school, increasing enrollment in post-secondary schools, and improving overall educational quality” (Orozco). The rate of illiteracy is so staggering that in 2015 twelve percent of the population 15 years old or older could not read or write. This is very high compared to the rest of Central America and the Caribbean which only had seven percent. Official statistics show that 95 percent of children of school age attend school at the primary level. However, the teacher’s union claims that in 2015 about one million children were neglected by the educational system. Also, drop-out rates in Honduras are also higher than those of the rest of Latin America. “In 2013, for example, a fourth of students dropped out compared to 16% in the region” (Orozco). There are many causes to the problem, but one problem that seems to cover the others is the inability to access good schools.

One possible solution to the problem is that the Honduran government could move the budget around to where there would be more money used for education can go towards building schools in more rural areas because many children have no way to access a school that exceeds a primary education. “To give some perspective, of the 23,835 schools, 21,761 are public schools, but only 10% or less offer secondary education. Moreover, close to 80% of those schools are in urban areas” (Orozco). By building schools in rural areas, the costs of transportation will decline which will help encourage parents and guardians to send their children to school because it does not cost as much to transport them. Although it does cost a large amount of money to build, maintain, and keep a school updated, spending this money now could potentially be beneficial to the economy in the future. Also, because many schools are not accessible to children, many programs have been formed in order to help raise money for developing countries. By contributing to these organizations, Honduras can receive extra funds which will help fund the building of new schools in areas where more children can go and to help pay teachers more in order to encourage them to want to continue being a teacher. It will encourage other people to want to be teachers as well. “The relationship between poverty and education is complex, but we know that education helps people

make healthier and smarter decisions about their children, their livelihoods and the way they live” (ChildFund). A possible solution is to subsidize the costs of going to school. In Honduras, to attend a secondary level school a student is required to wear a uniform. Due to many families being in poverty, they cannot afford to pay for uniforms, therefore they are forced to discontinue their education and try to enter the workforce. However, if the education system were to discontinue the requirement of uniforms then there would be a slight decline in the drop-out rate of students from primary to secondary school. Another solution is that the government could possibly provide uniforms for the students. This solution has even been tested in other parts of the world that have difficulty in fighting the illiteracy rate. It was proven by a Harvard University paper that “providing free uniforms to young primary school students reduced their absence by one-third, or 6 percentage points, with larger effects (13 percentage points, or 64%) for students who lacked uniforms prior to the program” (Kremer).

Another way to counteract the problem is to set a new education model. A new education model will combine the traditional content with information such as financial, health, and administrative skills which will benefit the students. A new model would focus on helping many of the Honduran citizens become self-efficacy. By helping improve the health curriculum, the work done by the World Health Organization on preventing disease, caring for sick people, and obtaining medical care. “Conceptual knowledge is put into practice at school through activities that empower children to use what they have learned. For example, students practice routine health behaviors, such as hand washing and wearing shoes near latrines—and, to the extent feasible, gain exposure to other important behaviors, such as boiling drinking water and using malaria nets. They practice routine market-like transactions by earning points for schoolwork and budgeting those points to obtain valuable prizes, such as sitting in a favorite chair or being first in line” (Epstein). By developing a new curriculum, students can be more prosperous when it comes to their day to day lives. With a new model, “students should practice teamwork, leadership and critical thinking. They should also gain exposure to entrepreneurship projects such as identifying and exploiting market opportunities through business ideas such as community recycling. This shift away from standardized learning will prepare students to make a positive impact on the social and economic wellbeing of their communities” (*Borgen*).

Another way to counteract the declining illiteracy rate is to get the parents more involved. Many studies have proven that many children in developing countries drop out of school due to pressure from their families to enter the workforce. In fact, “More than 250 million children between 5 and 14 form part of the labour force in developing countries, according to the ILO (International Labour Organisation). Most of them work full time and the rest combine employment with attending school” (Alvaro). If they are too young to enter the workforce then they are responsible for “looking after the home while parents are working or taking care of younger siblings” (Alvaro). By providing information to parents about the importance of education for their children, they will encourage attendance in schools and could possibly try to improve their living situation enough to be able to afford to send their children to school. Many educational experts have made the case that encouraging parents to be more involved in their child’s education. “A number of recent studies on United States have demonstrated that increased parental involvement in children’s learning is generally associated with better grades, test scores, and attendance, as well as increased motivation and an easier transition to upper grades” (Islam). Some organizations have started experimenting with how parental involvement affects a student’s education. In these studies, it has

been proven that by the parents being involved, the student feels supported by his or her family and is then extremely motivated to continue their education. However, this solution could also have a potential downside due to the fact that all parents might not be able to attend the meetings which could cause the child to believe that their parents do not have faith in them and they will lose all will power to continue their education.

Another potential solution is to provide better teachers for the students in the schools. There are many ways to provide the best teachers that will give the students the best education that they can. There are four possible steps that can be taken to achieve this goal. The first step is that they need to attract the best teachers possible. "It is important for all children to have teachers with at least a good secondary-level qualification. Therefore, governments should invest in improving access to quality secondary education to enlarge the pool of good teacher candidates. This reform is particularly important if the pool of better-educated female teachers is to increase in disadvantaged areas. In some countries, this will mean introducing affirmative measures to attract more women into teaching" (Teaching...4). They need to also consider hiring people from less populated ethnicities in order to ensure that the most students can be reached no matter what issues there are: for example, different dialects and cultural divisions. The second step would be to test the teacher's actual teaching ability when it comes to actual classroom teaching capabilities because a good teacher knows how to truly engage their students no matter what subject they are teaching. The third step would most likely be to raise the pay of a teacher. It does not have to be a drastic jump, but it should be enough to help keep their families above the poverty line at least. If the pay is increased then people will become motivated to become teachers. Also it might not just motivate adults to be teachers, it could potentially motivate children to stay in school in order to get a high enough education to actually become a teacher. The fourth step would probably be to enforce a strong school leadership to help monitor teacher misconduct. "Strong school leadership is required to ensure that teachers show up on time, work a full week and provide equal support to all. School leaders also need training in offering professional support to teachers" (Teachers...5). The Honduran government should work with whatever teacher unions are in place to control unprofessional behavior in the school. Getting better teachers is a way to improve the education system in Honduras.

Honduras is a country that has many factors that contribute to it continuing to be a developing country. The increasing poverty rate has caused a major commotion throughout the country. Better educating the people can help develop the country and benefit the people. Honduras has spent its entire existence as a developing country, but "the importance of education in developing countries cannot be overstated. Education can be the catalyst needed to pull families and communities out of the cycle of poverty. Knowledge gives children the power to dream of a better future and the confidence needed to pursue a full education, which in turn will help generations to come" (ChildFund). Honduras should focus on developing a better education system if they want to move forward in their economy.

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