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Guatemala: The Fight for Education in Rural Communities

In the region of Central America is a country full of hope, people, and some of the highest poverty rates in the world. Guatemala, a country consisting of roughly 16,500,000 people, is a presidential republic. Guatemala's main exports are sugar, coffee, bananas, and various vegetables which are a huge part of their agriculture industry (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). This country has a tropical climate containing both lowland and mountainous regions (Guatemala Geography & Regional Climate Zones, 2019). Guatemala is best known for its volcanic landscape and Mayan culture. Weather includes a rainy season from around May to October and a dry season from around November to April. Planting usually takes place in the rainy season from around May to July depending on the weather.

Roughly 5-6 people live in a household with 50% of the population living in what is considered inadequate housing. Almost 1 million people live in houses made of corn stalks, which are unstable and not suitable for healthy living due to climate change and the increased risk of illness. A typical diet in Guatemala consists of corn, often made in tortillas which can be filled with rice and black beans. Sometimes plantains and chicken and other meats are eaten too. With little variety of food, most of the population lives below the poverty line at just 2 dollars a day, and about 43% of children under the age of 5 are malnourished. There is also a large gap between the rich and the poor. While more than half of the population is living on 2 dollars a day, 0.003% of Guatemalans own 50% of the country's total bank deposits. Unless action is taken this gap will be continuing to grow. According to the UN "The number of people living in poverty in Guatemala has increased 22 per cent in the last 10 years" (Tauli-Corpuz, 2018).

About half of the population lives in rural areas (Food and Agriculture Policy Decision Analysis, 2014). This portion of the population is mostly native peoples, as around 41% of Guatemala's population is indigenous (Global Americans, 2017). Many that fall into this category are living in poverty due to racism and out casting of indigenous groups in Guatemala. Indigenous Guatemalans are not paid the same wages as European or Euro-Hispanic Guatemalans causing many indigenous Guatemalans to live in ways that lack basic human necessities. They lack things such as proper housing, medical care, education, food and clean water. It is hard for the indigenous families to escape poverty because without interference it is a constant cycle. Because the parents were not educated, they get lower paying jobs and can barely or not at all pay for their children's schooling. Unfortunately, the children growing up without education will have a lifestyle similar to their parents and will continue to be poor.

The majority of Mayan farmers are subsistence farmers. This means that they only grow what is sufficient for their families and there is little to no surplus produce to trade or sell for profit. With the growing climate change in mind, subsistence farmers are subject to harsh conditions. It's hard to predict the amount of crops they will be able to grow in a season, and therefore it's starting to become even harder to provide for their families. With extreme weather of contrasting droughts and flooding, the indigenous farmers and the agriculture industry as a whole are suffering greatly. The people need to have more resources on learning how to survive in the coming years through extreme climate conditions. New farming practices need to be taught in order to save the farms and farming families in Guatemala. A large issue facing indigenous farmers in Guatemala is how they are being treated as farmers. For larger "factory" farms, land is controlled by one owner, when previously it was owned by the indigenous people themselves. These workers are being treated unfairly by receiving low wages for the amount of work put in. In a past survey by CETIM it found that "90% of farm workers earn a salary that is below the national

minimum wage. For women, this rate climbs to 97%” (CETIM, 2015). Many work 9 to 12 hours a day and require assistance from their families to meet the daily quota. Most work in dangerous and unfit conditions for a workplace. Unions are legal in Guatemala but because of the low level of education of the indigenous population, few workers are aware of their rights. In addition, unions are discouraged by owners and are hardly ever formed due to threats and assassinations to activists and the workers’ fear of losing their jobs. Often times if the farmers lose their jobs they cannot find another place to work due to discrimination.

A conflict with training new farming practices and awareness is that there is limited access to education in rural areas, where, as stated previously, most farming is done. More than 2 million children in Guatemala are not attending school, most of whom are indigenous and female. The average time of schooling for an indigenous Guatemalan woman is 1.8 years (Quigley, 2018). Often times a family cannot afford school, so only one child can be sent. Even then the schools are poorly funded and they do not contain proper books, curriculum guidelines, exam materials, and literacy materials. Because normally only one child in a family can attend school, the male child is normally picked and female children are educated minimally at home and have to stay behind to take care of siblings. Only around 2.8 of Guatemala’s GDP is being spent on education. This results in 9 out of 10 schools in rural areas lacking proper books (Quigley, 2018), and challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Furthermore, this means that even if a family can afford school for their children, the school will fail at adequately educating them and education is almost not worth it for the amount of money the family could save or that child could make by working instead of going to school. For those reasons many of the schools have low attendance.

Another reason is that poverty is one of the leading causes of rural communities having children drop out of school. Children start work early to support their families. The dropout prospects increase even more for females because they are often married before age 18, and they need to drop out to take care of their family. Each year of secondary education reduces the likelihood of a child marrying by around 5% (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). However, only 26% of indigenous females are still enrolled in school by the time they reach the age of 17 (Quigley, 2018). Guatemala’s standard for toilets to pupils is one for every 25 students (Wash In Schools, 2019). Their standards for access to water and hygiene in school is 50 liters per student per day (Wash In Schools, 2019). While these goals sound good, only 40% of schools meet the official standards of toilets to students and only 64% of schools have access to clean water facilities throughout the year (Wash In Schools, 2019). Lack of privacy and toilets is another reason for many students to drop out of school. Girls have to struggle the whole day between deciding to relieve herself, causing ridicule and loss of dignity, or holding it in to the point of soiling themselves. When children can’t feel safe and comfortable in their own schools, action needs to be taken to change the unjust situation.

Half of Guatemala’s overall population has had primary school education. Only about 20% are able to attend secondary school and most have little knowledge of algebra and composition, and only understand basic multiplication at best. This results in the fact that only around 75% of the population above the age of 15 is literate. Less than a 10% of the population holds a university degree or higher (Orozco and Valdivia, 2017). This creates low levels of human capital which prevents economic growth and keeps wages low. Most teachers and school administrators are poorly trained and receive insufficient wages themselves. This creates a large turnover where most of the competent teachers leave the schools in the hopes of finding a job with higher wages and the schools are stuck with teachers who barely qualify to teach children. Having low quality of education affects the whole country. If people are never able to have a job that earns more than the lowest wages, they will never be able to afford proper food, sanitation, clean water and education for their own children. To solve the problem, one needs to start at the source, which in turn starts with educating the youth for a better future.

Despite these depressing statistics, there are some things being done to improve education quality in Guatemala. There are non-governmental organizations such as “Education for The Children” (EFTC, 2019) that are working to improve the quality of life for its students. EFTC is one of the first bilingual non-profit schools functioning in Guatemala that supports its students up through higher education as well. Not only does it sufficiently educate its students, but it also educates the parents. This is a simple step that could be taken to improve education throughout the whole country. Even if it’s just one night a week at the schools, educating parents enables them to help their children even more. Statistics have shown the benefits of having an education. Even if a person’s education is relatively small compared to developed countries, having any education at all puts one ahead of 39% of the worldwide poor who have had no formal education (Compassion International, 2019). If a child’s parent has access to education, they are more likely to have a better job and provide for their families. This further ensures that the child will be educated as well. According to Global Partnership For Education, “One extra year of schooling increases an individual’s earnings by up to 10%.”(Global Partnership for Education, 2019). Not only does education increase a family’s likelihood of climbing out of poverty, it also improves their lives in other aspects. A child whose mother can read is 50% more likely to live past the age of five, and children of educated mothers are more likely to be vaccinated and more likely to be less stunted due to malnourishment.

Another non-profit working in Guatemala is called Change For Children. They have been working with the Mayan Man indigenous people residing in Comitancillo. They provide seeds, tools and agricultural training for the farmers there. On their website it states that “The project includes nutrition and environmental education programs in schools and the establishment school gardens and agriculture training for students. School gardens supply school lunches using produce from gardens.” (Change For Children, 2019). The project covers 5 schools and 250 farming families. Over 2,000 people are positively affected by this program.

A course of action that has taken place in other countries such as the USA, India, and Finland is providing a school lunch program. This is seen in the previously mentioned Change For Children. Although not all programs guarantee universal free lunch, some do provide low-cost or free lunch in the highest impoverished areas. While funding for this program may be low, the outcome would greatly make up for the initial setback. Studies have shown that children learn better when they are properly fed and have enough sleep. Although sleep may be out of one’s control, the nourishment of a child can be helped. If schools were to start including a school lunch program, there would be less of a cost for parents to send their kids to school, as well as an incentive for students to go because they receive a free meal and the amount of information they retain will increase tremendously. Another benefit is that for indigenous families, the children eating food from the schools means that the food the family grows can be saved and possibly sold for a greater income. A school lunch program would not only help to solve part of the issue of dropouts, but would also prevent high levels of malnourishment and work to support and benefit the whole family.

A great way one could include school lunches with lower costs is to include classes on agriculture and farming. The students could have their own garden for the school that they cultivate, and then they use the produce from the garden to contribute to food for school lunches. Not only would the children learn about farming, but they could also apply any sort of academic subject to the gardens. For example, countless science projects and experiments could be done with the plants. Farming is easily related to math through the economics of owning a small business, budgeting, planning layouts of building, and constructing a farm. Students could also write about how they tend the gardens or proper practices, and use plant names as ways of learning the alphabet. If the gardens were also to have an additional section for animals, the students could learn proper animal care, beginner veterinary science, and other trades such as butchering, training, and caring for animals. The students could also learn valuable culinary skills and how to have a healthy diet.

A way to start this program could be to have international trainers come in and teach adults in the community how to keep the school sustainable and the program alive. Some of the program can be modeled after programs already in place in other countries. If funding is an obstacle, perhaps students from universities in developed countries could intern in Guatemala and have it as a project they need to complete if they are going into a non-profit or educational major. In that way, the trainers receive job experience and the village is helped by the improvements. Another way to fund is to ask the government for support. If the people of Guatemala could unite and try to convince their government to spend a little more on education, then the lives of almost everyone in their country could be improved. Finally, a last idea for funding is to create a mobile app similar to how organizations provide a platform for people to donate money to sponsor a child's education or save an animal. Such an app would also be similar to Heifer International, a non-profit that allows a person to buy an animal for a family that needs it and then that family "passes on the gift" by giving the first female animal to another family. This app or website could include a way for people to sponsor a school farm. Multiple families could help cover the cost of the farm and they would be provided with a way to see how their help benefits others. Families who wish to could go on volunteer trips and work side by side with the students to see tangible results of their kindness. A person is more likely to donate or help, if they know how they are helping instead of blindly donating their money into a vague organization. One way the schools could pass the gift is learning how to save seeds, and giving a portion of these seeds to other schools or farmers in need. In this way the schools would have the pride of helping each other as well.

In order for certain projects to work, the organizations involved need to make sure the programs will last. It's almost useless to train people, to help build schools, to improve sanitation, if within 5 years all the progress will be lost and the community will return to its old ways. If an implemented program is to stay, there should be some sort of biyearly checkups. It's unrealistic to think funding for a project will last forever, so it's important that the program can become self-sustaining within 2-3 years. In order to be sustainable, people in the community have to be willing to work to help provide the education for their students as well. Often times people from bigger cities are trained as teachers and because of the long commute or misunderstandings between them and the indigenous people, the teachers will quit the jobs they have in rural communities. If the teachers come from the indigenous communities themselves, they will have a greater understanding of the culture there and will have stronger connections with the people and students they are working with. Because of these connections, they will be more likely to stay. For the program mentioned previously, if there was a starter agriculture school that was successful, the teachers from that school could travel to others, eliminating the cost of overseas trainers. Once the students and teachers in one community learn how to have sustainable and sanitary practices, they can then teach others. Programs based on donations are great but at times they are also unreliable. Therefore it is ideal to make solutions that would include ways for the people of Guatemala to learn to help themselves for years to come.

A final way to help the indigenous youth of Guatemala is to spread awareness. This is probably the most cost-effective way to solve problems. Spreading awareness is not only easy, but is also a way an average person can help out; if a person doesn't have time or money to donate, they can donate their words. Keeping in mind the amount of technology used daily, using social media platforms to spread ideas would be a successful plan because it is free and it would reach a wide spectrum of people. An additional way to spread awareness is through companies. Companies may not want to sponsor or donate, but they could be more open to the idea of including issues of Guatemala in their advertising or online platforms. If larger companies were to agree to have a sort of "shout out" about Guatemala and the obstacles it's facing, it would help others realize how they could contribute to the solution and it would also make the company look appealing to its customers.

In a hope for a better future, education is the way to go. Education will help indigenous people know their rights, will guarantee jobs for many, and will help to cease the risk of poverty. Guatemala's future is its youth, and the more the youth are invested in now, the greater the outcome will be in the future. Through combined efforts of compassion and kindness, perhaps one day all the citizens of Guatemala will have equal rights, and access to proper education and in turn have access to a better life through improved food, sanitation, clean water, and jobs.

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