

Cheyenne Gerlach
Tri County High School
DeWitt, NE
Guatemala, Factor 16: Education

Guatemala: Books for Food

Angel Marcelo Marroquin is a sixteen year old boy from a town of 80,000 called San Martin Jilotepeque, Guatemala. San Martin Jilotepeque has one public junior high and no public high school. This is a problem for many families, like Angel's where the average annual income comes in at \$2,740 and the minimum food budget is \$3,304 for a family of five (Terra Experience). Angel has two brothers and one sister, whom along with Angel, desperately want to learn and study. The true story of Angel Marroquin summarizes the biggest problem in Guatemala flawlessly. George Washington, the founding father of our nation, once said, "The best means of forming a manly, virtuous, and happy people will be found in the right education of youth. Without this foundation, every other means, in my opinion, must fail." Robbing children of an education is robbing the country of a future. How can Guatemala create an economy without knowing how? I believe the common quote, "Those who can't teach" has it wrong. Guatemala is a prime of example of how it's those without a teacher who can't. Researchers in Guatemala found that the poorer half of the population in Guatemala only receives 60% of the daily minimum caloric requirements (United Nations Development Program). Labor representatives there concluded that even in a family where both parents worked, minimum wage was not enough for the family to meet basic needs. How does education directly affect the emptiness in all of these people's stomachs? Education is what provides a child with the self-confidence it takes to obtain a successful career as an adult. To me, education is more than sitting in a classroom learning the antiderivative of a complex function. Education is the proud feeling you get when you realize you now know something you didn't know before, the realization that you have endless potential because of how far you've already come. Education is the key to a prosperous career, economy, and country. By researching this conglomerate topic I've found enough information to define the problems that Guatemala is facing, explain the relationship between hunger and education, and finally propose my solution (Countries and Their Cultures).

The average Guatemalan family has five children. The large family of seven often eats tortillas and black beans, in fact, they have it with almost every meal. The school enrollment is low everywhere, but especially low in rural areas. Only one third of the population has access to health care on a regular basis. When looking at general websites about Guatemala, I found that the biggest problems facing Guatemala are crime rates, violence, food security, lack of education, and labor rights. Harsh conditions that are a daily reality to the Guatemalan citizens cause the mortality rate for children aged five and under to be at a horrible rate of sixty-eight per one thousand children compared to the United States seven. Per one hundred thousand, fifty-two people are murdered. In the United States that number is five, and the United Kingdom's is one. Gastrointestinal and respiratory problems are common because of poor sanitation and nutrition.

A closer look at food security and agriculture in Guatemala makes the country's challenges painfully clear. More than 85% of the farms are 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) or less. The main cash crops are coffee, sugar, bananas, and cotton. Although international trade is limited in most areas in Guatemala some other exports include hemp, essential oils, and cacao. In rural areas there's an inadequate amount of drinkable water (Rural Poverty Portal). These small towns also suffer from overpopulation and the farmers living in these "shanty towns" often have to walk several hours to get to their small farm plots. In 2011, it was reported that 60% of the workers were receiving less than minimum wage. The occasional wealthy makes substantially more than the significant poor (Guatemala- Agriculture).

At this point you can clearly see there's more than what meets the eye to this beautiful country. Educational problems in underdeveloped countries are the most overlooked problems worldwide. Education in Guatemala is deficient because the majority of children are in the work force by the age of twelve, which causes Guatemala to be the most illiterate country in Central America. The average literacy rate is 70.6% compared to the United States 99%. While educating women is a key element in preventing poverty, the literacy gender gap stands at a shocking difference with males at 79.5% and females at 68.7%, which brings Guatemala to the lowest female enrollment in Latin America (Guatemala Human Rights Commission). It gets worse. The urban literacy rate is 84.2% while the rural is less than 56% (U.S. Department of State).

"Humankind will not recover from its mistakes without global education." I think Rigoberta Menchu, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, is spot on while investigating Guatemala. With more than 25% of the population being illiterate, Guatemala is ranked 174 out of 194 in literacy. Only 3 in 10 children graduate from the sixth grade. One of the challenges which stands in the way of enlightening Guatemala is the language barrier. While over half of the population in Guatemala is indigenous, there is no schooling in Guatemala which teaches in indigenous languages. Sadly, the female indigenous population is the highest represented group of the 2 million children in Guatemala not attending school. Let's backtrack for a second. I mentioned earlier that the average annual income in Guatemala is \$2,740. If you multiply that by 2 million of uneducated children you get \$5.48 billion. That's just assuming they receive the average education, which in Guatemala is only up to the fourth grade. As we all know, the more education you have, generally, the more money you make. The chance of paying for these children's education is worth the price, when you look at how the economy would benefit from this type of investment. The physical state of the schools in Guatemala has room for improvement as well. In rural areas especially, the quality of books, curriculum guides, and exam prep guides is lacking. Since there is very little funding for education in Guatemala, the price for books, uniforms, and tuition causes many young children to drop out of school. Then they enter the workforce to help pay for food on the table; if they're privileged enough to have a table. Like most underdeveloped countries, Guatemala is lacking infrastructure which is a key in making advancements in any area. Lastly, finding available and qualified teachers is extremely problematic, notably in rural areas (Global Education Fund).

Jose, a 13 year old boy in Guatemala sells oranges, mangos, and apples on the dangerous streets of Guatemala City. He's pretty skilled at this trade though, considering he's been doing it since he was six years old. Both his mother and his grandmother sold fruit from the same train station so they think it's safe enough for Jose. He has dreams of becoming a teacher but the best chance he has at entering a schooling system is the informal schooling a charity called Pennat offers. Like many other schooling systems in Guatemala, Pennat has classes from 7:30 am to 11 am so that these child laborers can sell during the lunch rush. Unfortunately, one of the biggest obstacles in the way of Jose's education is his family. His family does not understand the need for an education, considering he is already making a wage. Jose's story, which is indistinguishable from the story of roughly 20% of children in Guatemala, makes me irrevocably grateful for every "stupid math class" I have ever taken (Shepard, Jessica).

After finding and clearly defining the problems, it's much easier to explore the relationship between the lack of education and hunger in Guatemala. Hunger and education have a great deal in common. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights even thought to put the two articles right next to each other as Article 25 being about the health of a person and Article 26 about education. It is the right of every human to have a full stomach and full mind. Being denied both food and education is inhumane and brutally cruel. The subjects of education and food have some obvious bonds, but to find the solution digging deeper is essential.

“Give a man a fish you feed him for one day. Teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime.” Education is a huge factor in not being able to produce food because the Guatemalan farmers do not know an efficient way to do so. Inefficiently grown food means less food, and as we all know less food means expensive food. In 2006, it was reported that Guatemala was giving up on conventionally grown agriculture, not because they were all on their blogs worrying about hormones and genetically modified organisms, but rather because they simply couldn’t do it successfully. So now farmers in Guatemala are trying to focus on producing “sustainably” and “organically.” Sustainable is a word that is thrown around entirely too much in today’s world. Organics, anti-conventional agriculturists, and anti-GMOs use the word like a sword towards conventional producers, but why? Do we have to go back to the Dust Bowl of 1930s? When United States settlers began plowing the earth they did so relentlessly. With a little help from a drought, an economy on the verge of breaking, and some Midwest wind, the settlers paid for their mistakes. Since then, we have been using technology and conventional production agriculture to conserve the land we’re lucky to have. The problem with the lack of food in Guatemala is the lack of education. How much stronger can the bond be? Now that we can clearly see exactly how the inadequacy of education in Guatemala directly affects the abundance of hungry stomachs, let’s talk solutions (Backroads to Boardrooms).

Where are the Borlaug’s, Rajaram’s, and Hillel are’s when we need them? Finding a way to end world hunger can seem to be an impossible task. Ending hunger in Guatemala however, is a very reachable goal. Guatemala is overflowing with resources. They are rich with productive soil, a wide range of climates, and many other resources. Many have believed for a long time that Guatemala lacks the mineral resources needed to build a successful economy without having to lean on international trade, but contrary to those beliefs, nickel, iron, silver, and gold have all been found. As you can see this country has potential, but how do we put this into play?

The situation in Guatemala is stagnant. Because of the lack of bilingual programs, the cycle of poverty is self-perpetuating. The lack of education denies the right to learn and grow and have opportunities. If education was to be put into the system in Guatemala, jobs would be put in the economy. With more jobs in the economy, money will start flowing and the poverty cycle will be broken. And with the right education, the farmers will learn how to produce food sustainably.

Although there are many mountainous regions in Guatemala, I believe there’s a way to build environmentally friendly greenhouses in places where the soil isn’t fertile. If only we could send scientists, researchers, and agriculturists to this resources-rich country then Guatemala would be flourishing and improving. If education of all kinds-- agricultural education, medical education, business education-- came into play generous amounts of money would be poured into the economy. The situation for over-worked men and underprivileged women and children would improve considerably (Education and the Developing World).

Increasing financial aid from the United States to Guatemala is not the way to improve education in Guatemala. While researching Guatemala and attending the World Food Prize Nebraska Youth Institute, I found that every corner of the world is struggling with food security, including the United States. Ideally, I would love to see the United States contribute specifically to the Guatemalan fight against hunger, but I know it’s not practical. The United States can help in continuing to import Guatemalan products and support the non-profit organizations. The Guatemalan government itself, could make giant steps by funding things like programs for infrastructure and books, but really, when I think of educating the 2 million children that aren’t attending school I think of non-government run organizations as the only viable option. I think of the Mujeres Trabajan Unidas Program, a local organization which focuses on educating poor, indigenous girls. Over 1,500 students are being impacted by this organization. It was officially recognized by the Ministry of Education in 2013. I also consider the Miguel Asturias Academy,

a private, non-profit school, in Guatemala that targets underprivileged children of Mayan descent. They educate 240 students every year, half of whom are girls. These types of programs and organizations are out there, and they are truly capable of being the catalyst which will lead education in Guatemala (Global Education Fund). Pencils for Promise and Choice Humanitarian are two other non-government organizations that are making a difference. Choice Humanitarian sends organizations, families, or students to Central American countries to build schools and sometimes even assist in harvest. Pencils of Promise is an organization with a wide variety of community service projects but is best known for their teacher support system.

According to Brent Whiting, YUDA Bands director, children must choose their career in school, if they are lucky enough to still be in school. "In high school, students must choose the career they want to study. Those who choose education are supposedly qualified to be school teachers when they finish high school. Very few teachers on any level will have any more than a high school education." I'm a senior this year and the idea of teaching a class of 30 eighth graders terrifies me, as it should. In no way, shape, or form am I qualified to do the work of a teacher who shapes the hearts and minds of our future.

As far as the factors that are not easily predictable- weather, urbanization, energy demand- that's where American technology comes in. Energy-creating windmills are beautiful and efficient and for thousands of hungry Guatemalans, they would mean food on their tables. There are also active volcanoes in the mountainous regions, which can pose challenges, but the fertility of the volcanic ash will increase the productivity of the soil to plant crops in the ground. The never-ending increase of population will make urbanization probable but if we help them use the land they have and conserve their resources, a solution to the problems urbanization brings will be soon to follow (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Both Millennium Development Goals number one and two (as established by the United Nations in 2000) are associated with the solution directly. Goal number one is eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. Goal number two is achieving universal primary education. If we reach the second goal, goals three through eight will be achieved much more easily.

The responsibility of communities, government, corporations, and other organizations is to never stop looking for solutions. My school worked with the Yuda Bands organization this winter raising money to send Guatemalan kids to school. A community in Guatemala makes handcrafted coconut shell bracelets for the Yuda Bands project. Yuda Bands organization find students who need help paying for school and put their bio on their site. Then schools like mine pick a student to sponsor. One year of schooling is the equivalent to selling 150 bands. Although the Yuda Bands isn't a hugely known organization, I know it has amazing potential and is touching Guatemala in the deepest way possible. Another idea would be to start a pen pal organization to get Guatemalan farmers in touch with conventional producers. That connection would light a spark that would not only be beneficial to the people of Guatemala, but also the American farmers. Angel Marcelo Marroquin is the boy that my school sponsored. My high school of less than 110 people sold 150 bands to our communities and paid for one year of Angel's education. That might not seem like a lot in the scheme of things, but one thing that the Yuda Bands project taught me was that every decision I make can influence or help someone else in the smallest or even biggest way. It might seem like Angel should be thankful for what my school did, but really I'm thankful for what Angel did. Seeing his desire to learn and improve his situation inspired me. The children of Guatemala are in a darkness that only the brightness of an education can illuminate. Feeding this great people begins with feeding their minds. The solution was found by exploring the relationship between the problem: hunger, and the factor: education. Before studying the relationship between the two subjects, defining the problem, or rather the problems, that Guatemala is facing was crucial. Guatemala is in a world full of darkness; let's turn on the light.

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