

Mindie Bird, Student Participant

Voyageurs Expeditionary High School, Iowa

## Central America: The Lost Land

Envision this: You wake-up to a pristine coastal view; the white sand beach feels like sunshine on your feet. The friendly locals are hard at work-smiles on each and everyone's face. This is what the Mexican/Central American region is like, right? Wrong the Central America countries of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama are countries that are very much overlooked. It is a region where poverty, corruption, and malnutrition rule everyday life. Placed in a world where Africa and Asia are seen as the only impoverished nations.

In the past decade, the Central American countries have experienced a continuous streak of economic and weather related shocks such as drought, Hurricane Mitch (1998), pest and disease infections, major drops in international price of coffee and other cash crops, illness, wind causing freezes, rain leading to floods, and severe to mild earthquakes. Still through all the disastrous activity-taking place, the most heartbreaking is that of the family life. From the year 1998-2001, known as the "bad years", families and home life have taken a brutal beating.

All measurements are taken in either percentages or years, which sufficiently shows the crucial transformation between worse to severe. For instance, the eight countries that make up the Central American/Mexican locality all have their fair share of economic problems. For example, Nicaragua is the poorest country in this area with a huge external debt, an unemployment rate of 10.5%, and a considerable amount of underemployment. In 1999, in Honduras \$3 billion went to damage inflicted by the Hurricane Mitch and caused the economy to shrink 3% with financial deficits following, leading to a future of 4.4 billion in external debt. With 73.2% of the population unemployed and 37.5% reported underemployed in the combined countries, gives a fair summary of the job opportunities in the Central American/Mexican regions, excluding the outside factors of "the bad years". Lack of work, a big obstacle for those depending on wages based on agriculture and non-agriculture labor, is the second stated consequence to "the bad years" following other losses such as reduced work opportunities, low incomes, unemployment, migration, and the shortfall of animals.

The main source of income for a majority of Central American families is agriculture; 72% of the families in agricultural communities depend on agricultural-related activities independently. Without the proceeds agriculture brings in, the next occupational market are ones that are not so prosperous. Handicrafts, small businesses, the gathering of wood and livestock are the only other flourishing markets. Thus, it makes agriculture not only the best market to choose, but also the most affluent. Even as simple as growing a bunch of crops sounds; most families do not have a secure access to land.

In El Salvador 32.7% of the population have land, only 14.7% have documents, so at any given time the El Salvadorian government can sweep in and take the land away, along with that current year's assets. If a family chooses to hit the major market of agriculture, the choices are very limited to the growth of crops such as corn, sorghum, rice, and fruits, if they are lucky. Cash crops such as coffee and sugar should be the number one crop on every families list, but considering the unpredictability of the economy, and recent declination of international coffee prices; so would you take the risk?

Another factor taken into consideration is the land availability; for example, if you live in Belize, only 2% of the land is fit for the growth of crops, and half of that (1%) is in use for permanent crops. The biggest risk, when the growth of crops is of interest, is the weather. Drought ranks as the number one obstacle to food security in both Guatemala and Nicaragua, and with a designated area named "The

Drought Corridor” where a dry season of more than six months takes place; growing crops becomes even more difficult.

Livestock is the other choice but because of factors such as migration, weather, and economic stability, it is less popular. A family frequently chooses to limit their amount of domestic animals that consists of pigs, cows, and horses, and poultry. In Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, poultry is often the preferred livestock because its small size is ideal for migration. Still with the money made from such hard work, life is still problematic due living standards.

Weather also plays a HUGE factor in the lives of Central Americans. With hurricanes, floods, land slides, volcanoes, and El Nino taking evident place in each country. Because of such weather shocks rapidly occurring, many families have not recovered, or at the best are living in the same conditions. For example in El Salvador, because of the frequent and destructive earthquakes and volcanic activity, it is fondly known as “The Land of Volcanoes”, leaves people unemployed and the land destroyed. Shocks such as drought cause such problems as migration, and negative food utilization in the families.

With the continuous exhaustion of family resources and the difficulty of determining a minimal standard of life prevents families from responding to shocks and often push them deeper into poverty. The Drought Corridor plays a big part in the lives of many families living in the elected area, negatively. Families often expect the weather shocks but cannot handle them, but when threatened by weather tribulations families respond with negative actions.

The slow depletion of food consumption is frequently the answer to hard times, acutely affecting children leaving them vulnerable to diseases and malnourishment. A child’s basic diet consists of corn/tortilla with salt, beans with corn or tortilla, soup of beans, beans with eggs, seasonal fruits, a drink of sorghum/corn/flour/rice, a refreshment of fruit/corn/oat, and eggs when available. During a time of crisis, the diet is reduced in variety, products served, consumption, breakfast is cut, and schools give the children additional food during meal times. In countries like Guatemala, where children are dying from acute malnutrition, programs such as The World Food Program are requesting funds to help feed the regional hungry.

The chronic malnutrition rates in Central America range from 23% to 48%, revealing that children regularly face malnutrition in childhood. Another answer to weather shocks is migration-the process of moving from one area to another. The negative impact it has on families is the economical one. Families have to either start to grow crops all over again, endanger their livestock by moving them than worry about the adaptability, and the possibility of not finding land and having to readjust the families income source. Problems double for women, deeming that women and families with no land are among the most vulnerable.

Living conditions are very poor attributable to deforestation, water pollution from a wide variety of toxic waste to sewage, agricultural runoff, solid waste disposal and management, soil erosion, weather damage exclusively due to Hurricane Mitch, urban population expansion, industrial polluting of fresh water utilization, and land degradation constantly burdening active households. Each country has their own factors that are gnawing at the lives, and jobs of their land. For example, Honduras- has an estimated population of 6,249,598 people but even that number is strongly taking in account the consequence of excess death rates due to AIDS. Honduras also has a considerate environmental problem; mining activities pollute Lago De Yojoa the largest source of fresh water, which leaves it undrinkable. Belize has the greatest amount of unemployment. With a rate of 14.3% in a populated country of 249,183 people, consequently separating 336,322 from a stable source of income and an established occupation. Nicaragua, as one of the countries poorest countries also has the lowest life expectancy rate. Only 3% of a population of 4,812,569 makes it to the blissful golden years of 65 and older, mainly due to the poor living standards that surround them.

Taking into great consideration the status of the people, and the overall severity of the situation, tells me that the relationship between the people and their governing bodies is one that is very unclear. The Mexican government receives 1.166 billion dollars in economic aid, but the state of its people speaks otherwise. Mexico has a free market economy that leaves the economy solely dependent on private enterprises; and as a result, income distribution is very unequal. In Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama combined present 1282.8 million dollars of received economical aid, and that excludes Mexico, and Nicaragua's high acquirement of aid money. In addition, signs of desperation such as drug use and cultivation, demonstrate the quick need for money in all countries. Such as Costa Rica, where there is a high illicit drug issue because of lack of employment opportunities. Panama stands as a transshipment country for cocaine and heroin from the South American continents, and the illegal manufacturing of cannabis on small, rural farms, along with cocaine consumption rates rising. Without the worrying of an instable income, or economic situations, clearly makes the drug market a fast money making market.

My solution would be to educate people in their chosen government rulings, teach them the how to financially hold themselves as a stable government. Next would be to send in such programs such as the Harvest Plus organization and instill a good knowledge in the people of how to handle land and indefinitely teach them to value of good nutrition. Improving the governmental standards and land usage would take a step in a more positive direction for this area. Mainly because of the high unemployment rates, corrupt governmental rulings, living standards of people, and nutritional value instilled on people would improve.

Another issue that needs attending to is that of the school life. Many children are being pulled from school in order to work on family farms so the family can earn barely enough income to live. The Peace Corp is known for their friendly volunteers with high adaptability to impoverished conditions. Therefore, I believe the Peace Corp should start a schooling program that would encourage women on good nutritional value, implement men with on good economical awareness, and children with a firm education on their country. Hence benefiting women, children-which are the countries most vulnerable group-farmers, and general public in the Central American/Mexican regions.

My personal view on the attempt to solve world hunger and obesity is as follows. Number one, all organizations should stop trying to solve world hunger alone, instead, they should all focus more on the issues that cause hunger. Hunger is not a problem but more a factor, a factor in a cause-affect relationship, which paves the way for a world issue. For instance, agriculture, influences economy, which in turn shapes the lifestyle of the people, and in consequence, it is the citizens who feel the result from the cause-effect relationship. Hunger alone is not an issue it is a dilemma following other major crises. The basic human drive is too always find food. It is just the conditions you live in that effect your food for the day. Being hungry is not always just a cure from a box, made with loving care from some other country. Hunger is the state of being deprived of food and a box can only last for so long.

I believe the U.N. should take a closer look at the countries with high obesity rates and urge them to help starving countries located within their regions. It is completely senseless for the U.S. to be sending food to Africa, when Europe is just as capable. I truly have the faith that splitting the countries to have designated regions, for example, the U.S. and Central America, and have the country with a stable economy, high obesity rates, responsible for a more destitute country. This would kill two birds with one stone, hunger and all the problems it causes such as malnutrition, unstable governments, dying people, on one end of the scale, obesity, and human compassion on the other.

National governments should be more worldly on choosing which countries they are going to provide aid to, instead of using them for political campaign points. It is because that the American government use Africa and Asia as campaign points that countries like Central America, and Mexico get passed over when it comes time to divvy out the aid money. In addition, since North America is so

admired other countries feel compelled to follow suit. Consider that if all the government agencies were willing to take part and work for a solution, a solution is bound to be found. Hunger and malnutrition, with obesity rates so increasingly high, is completely inexcusable.

The World Food Prize Youth Institute is a program designed to make the youth more aware of the problems of the world, and what we can do to solve them. If everyone just did one thing, which is six billion people doing one thing, something even as simple as collecting money for organizations like, Feed My Starving Children. Maybe my answer is not one to solve the world's problems, or one you agree with, so I challenge you to come up with an idea, possibly you have the answer. I leave you with the strong words of my father, "You are not expected to make a difference, but be a difference."

### Bibliography

Morrison, Marion. *Nicaragua: Enchantment of the World, Second Series 2002*

Morrison, Marion. *El Salvador: Enchantment of the World, Second Series 2001*

Bryon Augustin. *Panama: Enchantment of the World, Second Series 2005*

Elton, Catherine. "The World's Other Food Crisis: Central America"  
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1030/p07s01-woam.html>. October 30, 2002

<http://www.ed-u.com/country-backgrounds-and-profiles-list.htm>

[http://www.rtfcam.org/report/volume\\_23/No\\_2/article\\_1.htm](http://www.rtfcam.org/report/volume_23/No_2/article_1.htm)