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## A study on Honduran Education

### **Introduction**

Honduras is a republic of contrast: lush tropical rainforests, cool interior highlands, rich grasslands, and large coastal plains. Yet, even with the wealth of natural resources, Honduras is the poorest, least developed country in Central America. Honduras has traditionally been an agrarian society with a vast majority of its citizens living in rural areas.

The poor is the largest social class in Honduras. Campesinos (rural peasants) make up 57% of the population (Targ, Brill). Most rural dwellers are small farmers who till their own plots or landless laborers who work for wages on estates or smaller farms.

The educational future is of least importance in the campesinos' mind. The average education level for a Honduran is the fourth grade. This limited education is due to the lack of schools and teachers. Parents tend to take children away from their education at a young age to help maintain the family farm and support the family income. Hondurans often receive substandard education with little emphasis on proper agricultural practice training.

The peasant farmer typically earns a low income which in turn makes it very difficult to purchase proper foods to maintain a healthy lifestyle. According to the WHO (World Health Organization), 75% of Hondurans lack proper vitamins for good health. (Brill, Targ) Poor food productivity and low incomes lead to a very low standard of living in the rural countryside, illness and poor diets are very common.

In the future, Hondurans will face increased issues of inflation for essential foods and inadequate education. Crime, lack of education, widespread poverty, and inflation of the cost of essential items are major barriers to improving food and nutrition security. There is no financial assistance for the poor and as a result, they learn to steal to survive. Crime rates have risen in Honduras, since there are few government social programs.

A feasible solution to the crisis is increased agricultural education. Hondurans need to be taught core agricultural education and crop management practices. Primary education must be achieved for every child. Secondary education must be promoted as an asset to family farm sustainability, so that an increasing number of children are allowed to and pursue higher education.

### **Typical Honduran Family**

The family is the fundamental social unit in Honduras. Campesinos (rural peasants) compose the largest percentage of the Honduran families. These families tend to be more stable than their counterparts in the city. Since the marriage partners are usually residing in the midst of their kin, a man cannot desert his wife without disrupting his work. The family provides a solid foundation during political upheavals and economic reversals.

A typical family consists of a mother, up to nine children and occasionally a father. Approximately half of the Honduran households are headed by women. (Targ, Brill) Few men and women marry in rural areas due to the cost of a wedding and a shortage of priests. Men who don't marry move from household to household, starting new families.

Married and single women are responsible for the children and the household. The mother does house duties such as grinding corn for meal, washing and mending clothes, and gathering firewood for cooking. After bringing the men lunch in the fields, the women usually join the men working with the crops. Young children accompany the mothers while older children may work with their fathers in the fields. Few are able to gain an education, since they must help with the family income. The men work very long, hard hours in the fields using primitive farming practices.

Peasants work long hours to earn a meager wage. Average payment is barely \$1.50/day. They try to obtain part time employment to add to the family income. Any funds earned from excess crop sales contribute to payment for medicine, clothing and foods not grown locally.

A typical family lives in a one room hut called a rancho. This hut is typically composed of bamboo, sugar cane, or corn stalks and mud without a door. Overhead are roofs of tightly woven sugar cane. Occasionally, there may be a cloth to divide the single living quarters. Few peasants can afford furnishings for their homes. Beds are usually mats on the floor or hammocks hung outside. Other furnishings may consist of chairs of tree stumps to provide seating.

Corn, rice and beans are typical fare. Corn is the primary food staple and most widely planted crop. Corn is made into tortillas and eaten regularly. Beans are the main source of protein in the Honduran diet. Seasonally, plantains, and coffee are added to the Honduran diet. Green vegetables and meats are rarely included in the peasant diet.

Traditional methods of farming are used to grow crops along with the slash and burn method. Farmers plant and reap their crops with simple tools such as machetes, hoes, axes, and digging sticks. They grow their crop naturally without modern technology or fertilizer. A typical subsistence farm family owns or works farm land that covers less than five acres (two hectares). Primitive storage facilities of the typical farm family contribute to the loss of a large percentage of crops to rodents and pests.

Rural farmers continue to clear out miles of forest with the age-old slash and burn method of agriculture. This method of farming creates a dilemma for the government as it pits the country's ecosystem against providing food for the citizens of the country. Honduras is in danger of losing the very land that supports its people. Slash and burn techniques are almost always deleterious when practiced on a large scale. The nutrient poor soil is vulnerable since biomass is extracted when this technique is used. The residual soil value is heavily diminished for growth of any further vegetation. Large scale erosion usually ensues, since there are no roots or temporary water storage to stop surface runoff.

Approximately 60 percent of the Honduran land remains forested and only 25 percent of the total land is available for agriculture or pastureland. As the population in the region continues to grow, the trend toward small farms in marginal areas has increased. The steepness of the mountain slopes makes agriculture extremely difficult. Ninety percent of the Honduran mountainous area has slopes with gradients that are marginal for agriculture or cannot be used due to the steepness of the terrain.

More than 57 percent of the campesinos live in villages away from main roads. Distance and rugged terrain make it difficult to influence politics, religion, and the economy. To sell excess crops, campesinos travel to nearby villages. If there is no existing nearby market for the crops, the farmer may combine his crops with other farmers in the village and send it to a distant market.

Honduran agricultural production is low since the amount of crop yielded by a given amount of land has been low. For example, Honduran coffee yields historically have been only half those in Costa Rica. Instead of using improved techniques to increase the productivity of the land, Honduran farmers

have merely increased the acreage under cultivation to produce more crops- pushing their fields ever farther in the forests. Given the limited amount of good quality agricultural land to begin with, that policy has resulted in continual deforestation and subsequent erosion. This reluctance to improve techniques, coupled with generally poor soil, a lack of credit, and poor infrastructure, has contributed to low production figures.

### **Education of Family Farmers**

Education is not a priority in the campesinos' mind. The average education level for Honduran children is the fourth grade. Families do not value education since it takes the children away from the farm labor and provision for the family. Parents tend to take children away from their education at a young age to help maintain the family farm and support the family income. Hondurans often receive substandard education with little emphasis on proper agricultural practices training.

Prior to 1957, education was the exclusive privilege of the wealthy who could afford to send their children to private schools. In the late 1950's, the Honduran government made primary education obligatory for every child between the ages of seven and fourteen. This education would be provided through the establishment of a national public education system.

Although education is a requirement for children, the reality of the Honduran educational system is very poor. Limited education in Honduras is due to the lack of schools and teachers. Schools are not readily accessible in rural areas. In the rural countryside, the illiteracy rate is greater than 80 percent. In fact, only forty-three percent of children enrolled in public schools complete the primary level. At any Honduran school, enrollment gets progressively smaller as the grade period increases. A specialized senior high trains primary school teachers. Most teachers in the primary schools only teach for a few years before marriage, so there is always a shortage of qualified teachers. Only eight percent of all children enrolled in public schools continue to a university.

Honduran children do not grow up with the knowledge of the basic food pyramid. The children are not trained to know the value of a varied diet consisting of the five food groups. Parents and children are not aware that fruits, vegetables, meats and milks are all needed for a healthy lifestyle, and fats, oils, and sweets should be limited. In fact, at school, the Honduran children do not learn about nutrition, or basic agriculture. They are taught the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Knowledge of nutrition and proper agricultural practices are a luxury.

Given the nature of the typical diet and the fact that food production has been insufficient for the country's needs, widespread malnutrition is prevalent. This complicates the population's fragile health. Population growth exacerbates the problem, creating a vicious cycle of more mouths to feed, yet lower agricultural productivity, as well as transportation and distribution difficulties.

A typical diet of beans, rice and corn does not cover the necessary five food groups. Essential nutrients and vitamins are missing in the Honduran diet. Access to the proper foods to enrich the Honduran diet is almost impossible.

Education is the key to reducing poverty in Honduras. This can be achieved by intellectual thought processes to promote independent thinking. They will learn to plan ahead and understand results about current agriculture and sustainability research. Providing access to current information and teaching Hondurans new skills will save millions of aid dollars in the future. Informing Hondurans of current event topics in the world will help Hondurans become aware of their importance in the world economic system. This information can also help the Honduran with new agricultural practices since Hondurans are virtually a hundred years behind in agricultural practices.

Education about current issues like biotechnology and effective agricultural practices will influence Hondurans to be more secure in the world economy. The more education and more financially stable the farmer is, the more likely he is to experience greater risks, and therefore greater profits, and higher yields. There is currently no trend to promote agricultural education and research. Once information and education is effectively introduced, one can measure the success by the eventual increase in exports, and the stability of the current economy.

The future success of Honduran families depends on the success of today's Honduran families. Currently, more money is going being appropriated to pay for foreign debt than there is for education. Conversely, if a greater investment in education was made, future Hondurans would be better economically prepared to face international debt. Honduras' hope for reducing poverty lies in the government's willingness to set limits on foreign investors. The government frequently issues new money for projects to modernize and expand the Honduran economy. Foreign investors have been in the best position to take advantage of these grants and loans and therefore benefit most from these programs.

Traditionally, women do not have equal rights in the Honduran culture. As Hondurans become more educated, the value of women in society increases. The structure of the family in the past has been a very submissive female as the head of the home. As more women become educated, they will find a voice in a world of change.

### **Solutions and Recommendations**

Though education is not the answer to the entire Honduran food crisis, it will go the distance in solving the poverty crisis. In the green revolution, Norman Borlaug not only helped develop higher yielding crops, but he went to poverty stricken areas and taught the people how to raise cereal crops. In our world today, the education, technology, and ability are available to the developed world. The wealth of knowledge must be shared with the underprivileged. There are current solutions available for nutrient deficiency and low crop yields. When the Honduran rural peasant learns of the new technologies, they will be motivated to use the new techniques. With education, there will eventually be financial success so that there will be enough money to purchase food with the proper nutrients for good health.

With the inflation rate at 9.7% (Shields) and rising annually, growth of the economy remains dependent on the status of the United States economy. Educating Hondurans on effective means of agricultural practices and higher yield biotechnology would help them become more independent of the US economy. Other factors that contribute to economic dependence include the volatility of commodity prices, particularly coffee, and containment of the recent rise in crime.

A feasible solution to the poverty crisis is an increase in agricultural education. It is necessary for Hondurans to be taught core agricultural education and crop management practices. A primary education must be available, effective and achieved for every child. Secondary education must be promoted as an asset to family farm sustainability so that an increasing number of children are allowed to and pursue higher education.

Many organizations in developed countries have the resources to support challenged countries like Honduras. Private enterprise must see the need to invest in this country's greatest asset, the children. Education is the key to a change in policies and techniques. Information must be shared to make the education process successful.

Since agricultural education is so vital to reduce poverty, the United States and many other developed countries have many agricultural education organizations. I propose that WHO, FAO, and the World Food Prize to bond with the younger generations of Agricultural education such as 4H, Future

Farmers of America and other similar groups in other countries, join together to make a curriculum for Honduran adults and children outlining new types of agricultural and sustainable practices. The curriculum must be taught effectively to the Honduran next generation. The younger Americans and representatives from other developed countries will bring not only food, but seeds, and techniques to start a new generation of Honduran agriculture.

### **Conclusion**

Honduras is a country of contrasts. There is a wealth of natural resources, from rainforests, to coastal plains. These resources have been tapped by the country in some ways. But, the most important resource of the nation has not been tapped. This country's children have not been given the proper tools to succeed.

While the poor are the largest class in Honduras, they do not value education as a solution to their poverty. The children are not given opportunity to get even a primary education and even less a secondary or higher education. Families need the children to be available to work in the fields to financially support them. It is unfortunate that parents tend to take children away from their education at a young age.

Honduran farm children receive substandard education with little emphasis on proper nutrition and agricultural practices. Families maintain poor diets due to lack of funds to purchase a variety of vitamin enriched foods. Peasant farmers have low crop yields due to a lack of technology and available fertile land. Low incomes and a very low standard of living ensue in the rural countryside.

A feasible solution to the poverty crisis is an increase in agricultural education. Educational organizations in developed countries need to develop curriculum to share with underdeveloped countries. Hondurans need to be taught core agricultural education and crop management practices. Primary education must be achieved for every child, while secondary education must be promoted to maintain farm sustainability. As the saying goes, "Give a man a fish, and he can eat for a day. But, if you teach a man to fish then he can feed himself for a lifetime." Thus, teaching younger Hondurans better agricultural practices through their primary and secondary educations, will provide food for this generation as well as those in the future.

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