

Engaging in Diplomatic Initiatives
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Introduction

Aristotle discusses the importance of the majority, whether wealthy or not, in his quote “In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme.” However, if the majority has no power they become helpless and silent. This has been the plight of the poor and indigenous population in the country of Guatemala. Over the centuries, wealthy landowners have made life barely survivable for those who subsistence farm in Guatemala, a country with a large rural, agricultural based population located in Central America. In fact, over 60 percent of the population depends on agriculture to survive. Whether it was a CIA coordinated overthrow of Guatemala’s democratic government in the 1950s, a thirty-six year civil war, government policies of the 1990s that were never implemented, or unfair land acquisition, subsistence farmers of Guatemala have had a difficult life. For these reasons, subsistence farmers in Guatemala would benefit from governmental changes in diplomatic conflict prevention and resolution with governance based on principles of democracy; the accountability and transparency of public institutions, and the rule of law to reduce the number of vulnerable members in society.

Since the Spanish conquest Guatemala has been a country of high malnutrition, poverty, and inequality. The lack of land and government assistance has left the subsistence farmers hungry and powerless. When looking at Guatemala’s GDP, however, the country is doing fine economically, but income inequality throughout the country has left the subsistence farmers scarcely noticed, even though rural citizens and agricultural workers make up three quarters of Guatemala’s 51 percent poverty rate. The inequality existing in the country is a key reason why the farmers face such harsh conditions.

In order to reduce the number of vulnerable members in the Guatemalan society, more power needs to be implemented to the small farmers. To resolve the food insecurity of Guatemalan subsistence farmers, the government needs to assist its people living in poverty. In addition, Guatemala needs to eradicate the issues in its property rights system. With the cooperation and assistance of the country’s government, along with that of world governments and organizations, the life for the subsistence farmers of Guatemala can improve. This paper will look at the predicaments of today’s Guatemalan subsistence farmers and the ways governments can provide solutions to their troubles.

Subsistence Farmers

Subsistence farming is farming for survival. The products of these farms are intended to provide the basic needs of the farmers and their families, with little surplus for market. Despite the labor intensive and time-consuming work of subsistence farming, it doesn’t meet the food security needs of the Guatemalan rural families. In many families, the men, the women, and even the children have to find other work to meet the family’s basic needs. In order to supplement these needs that their harvests do not provide, many of these subsistence farm families work as seasonal labors on large coffee, sugar, and banana plantations. Lately, however, a global coffee crisis has stopped production at several of these coffee plantations, leading to the unemployment of many farmers and leaving them with no way to provide for themselves. Sometimes the children of these families find basic jobs, like shining shoes, in urban areas to help with family income. Recently, farmers have chosen to migrate to countries like the United States in order to work and then send funds back home to their families in Guatemala. These funds are frequently a family’s only means of survival. Still, the average family only earns roughly \$6.00 a day. Thirty-two percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day and 13.5 percent lives on less than \$1 a day. These low incomes make simply surviving a challenge.

On average, each subsistence farm consists of less than 1.5 acres of land. These tiny plots have been intensively cultivated which has led to soil degradation. In addition, the farmers lack modern farming equipment and technology, along with fertilizers. Maize is the most common crop grown by subsistence farmers, but beans, wheat, potatoes, various vegetables, and occasionally coffee, are grown as well. The typical subsistence farm family diet is low quality and filled with carbohydrates. Maize is the main source of protein and calories in the diet of the subsistence farm families, with white maize being consumed more than yellow maize. A maize based diet, however, does not provide enough necessary nutrients nor meet the dietary needs of the family. Black beans are a key protein source that is consumed by most households, but they have become too expensive for daily consumption. Furthermore, farmers are often forced to sell off their beans, vegetables, and other highly nutritious crops. This leaves families chronically malnourished. In some areas, malnutrition levels top 90 percent, which is among the highest malnutrition rates in the world. Nearly half of the families lack electricity and running water. The substandard living conditions of the families only worsen their situation.

Many rural Guatemala families can barely afford to feed themselves let alone send their children to school. Many parents believe their children would be more useful working at home. For those children who do enter school, only one in ten finish the third grade. Additionally, it is estimated that 80,000 children drop out of school each year. The government spends a meager 1.6 percent of the GDP on education. This lack of resources for education reinforces the parents' idea that their child is better off at home than in school. Statistics reflect this position as one out of every five children, between seven and fourteen years old, works thirty or more hours a week. Moreover, thirty-one percent of the population is illiterate, while fifty percent cannot read beyond the easiest words. Illiteracy has been continuously connected to malnutrition and poor health. Literacy is not only an important skill for the individual, but it is also important to the community as it helps provide leadership. In addition, Guatemalan subsistence farmers lack adequate education in agricultural techniques and procedures as well as government procedures.

The average family size in Guatemala consists of six members. However, size can vary greatly between each family, as the average number of children born to each Guatemala woman in her lifetime is five. Most families consist of parents and their unmarried children, but some families may include a married child and his or her family. Oftentimes families also take care of elderly relatives. Family is very important to a majority of Guatemalans. Family members tend to live close to each other and spend a lot of time together. Several Guatemalans feel parents are *espejos* (mirrors): "through them, you learn who you are and what you can become" (Family Life). This existing belief shows why change in improving the lives of these families is slow to come. The children do as their parents do and have done.

Inequitable distribution of land is a major barrier lowering the agricultural productivity of the Guatemalan subsistence farmers. Guatemala has one of the most unequal and skewed land distribution patterns in the world with about 2 percent owning 70 percent of the productive farmland. With the large food corporations and wealthy plantations owners controlling most of the country's rich farmland, it leaves subsistence farmers struggling to survive on tiny inadequate plots. The farmers cannot produce or earn enough to sustain a healthy family. As the productivity of Guatemalan subsistence farmers decreases, they are forced to purchase more of their food. The price of food, however, is going up and so the farmers stop buying as much food, eat less food, and eat less frequently, which leads to even more chronic malnutrition.

Lack of government assistance along with scarce education is another barrier faced by the subsistence farmers. For centuries the government has failed to act on the condition of its rural people. The government has continuously put large corporations first despite the fact that the majority of the

population consists of the poverty stricken, indigenous people. Consequently, the subsistence farmers are left with little income; therefore, they cannot afford education or food.

Principles of Democracy

In 1821, Guatemala gained independence from Spain, but Guatemala's rural indigenous people reaped little from this independence. The growing class of rich Ladinos or Spanish-descendants continued to gain power over the country. As Guatemala's exporting power increased, the large plantation owners forced many of the indigenous people off their lands and into poor paying jobs working on the plantations. Others were forced to relocate to the less productive highland areas. In 1952, Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz started the Agrarian Reform Law. The law would have redistributed unused large plantation land to poor farmers and helped an estimated 100,000 families. However, this reform endangered the land holdings of large foreign companies, like the North American-Owned United Fruit Company. In 1954, the United States government ordered a CIA overthrow of Arbenz. The democratically elected president's reform was never put into action and the land was returned to the large plantation owners. A 36-year civil war followed that would put the best lands in the holds of wealthy military personal. At the end of the civil war, the 1996 Peace Accord stressed the importance of government support in rural development and underlined the government's role of supplying land to subsistence farmers. Unfortunately, conditions of the accord were never implemented. Therefore, Guatemala continues to be a country devastated by inequality and poverty. Democratic principles are imperative. Otherwise, Guatemala's conditions will remain the same.

The subsistence farmers who have suffered the worst throughout Guatemala's history make up a large majority of the population and would benefit immensely from improved democratic principles. In a more democratic society, subsistence farmers would have more power as the majority. If they were empowered to vote, they could elect officials who could provide them with more productive land and enforce their rights to the land. Currently, Guatemala does not have a national property registry to keep track of landholdings. Frequently, citizens claim the same piece of land and it leads to brutal land disputes. With a more democratic government, the subsistence farmers would have a government to provide a Land Information Registry that would cover their land interest and give them more control over productive farmlands. As the productivity among the farmers increases so would their voice. With this voice, the subsistence farmers would have the strength and the power to continually encourage such principles of democracy

Accountability and Transparency

Throughout the history of Guatemala, large landowners and foreign companies who are mostly interested in exporting crops have wrongfully and forcefully taken the land of the indigenous subsistence farmers. The government has allowed crop-exporting plantations to take their land without communicating with the farmers. The Guatemalan government lacks accountability by not responsibly and ethically dealing with these land ownership issues. Governments should discuss and communicate with subsistence farmers to handle the problems in their society. The Guatemalan government does not. In the government's failure to do so, subsistence farmers have been forced from the productive farmlands of Guatemala, hindering their ability to gain food security and live prosperously. The lack of accountability and transparency in the government is evident through its poor handlings of the subsistence farmers and their land.

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "By creating the environment for a more responsive government in Guatemala, USAID will provide opportunities for all citizens to benefit from an improved legal system characterized by greater accountability and transparency with out regard to gender, race, religion, or ethnic background." Almost 75% of the indigenous population is poor and the racial discrimination against them is frequent and relentless. The

indigenous women face even more discrimination and abuse. The rule of law would protect the indigenous people from such discrimination. By creating a more responsive government, subsistence farmers would have more opportunities to partake in and oversee government decisions and the election of government officials. They would also gain better representation in Congress and social organizations. This will help to eliminate the separation between the wealthy Ladinos and the poverty stricken indigenous people of Guatemala. Citizens would have more access to information, reap the benefits of a more transparent budget, and have more confidence in state institutions. It would also prevent subsistence farmers from losing their land. In addition, through a more equal society elected government officials can begin to provide farmers with more productive land. This would improve the quality of life for subsistence families.

The Rule of Law

According to the University of Iowa Center for International Finance and Development, “In the most basic sense, the rule of law is a system that attempts to protect the rights of citizens from arbitrary and abusive use of government power.” The rule of law is key in protecting the vulnerable members of Guatemala, but so far such laws have not been implemented. Police or the private security forces of large landowners repeatedly force peasants from their lands. In January of 2004, Oscar Berger took office as president of Guatemala. From that time until September of 2004, 41 subsistence farm families were removed from their lands. The President allowed the National Civil Police to set fire to their crops and homes, leaving many of them homeless. The police also murdered several of the peasant leaders and rural families. During his campaign, Berger had promised to make land more available to poor farmers and to impound lands taken illegally and forcefully from the small farmers. He also “said” he would aid the subsistence farmers by 1.) providing technical assistance, 2.) providing credit and market information, 3.) helping farmers produce enough food for sale at market, and 4.) securing fair property and labor rights. All of these proposals and more would have provided the beginning of a new, prosperous life for the subsistence farmers, but Berger offered nothing to fulfill his promises. The subsistence farmers need a strong rule of law. This would allow them to have a voice in their government. It would help prevent subsistence farmers from having their land taken. It would give them a chance for equal justice and prevent government abuses of power as seen in Berger’s reign. In addition, it would prevent the government from passing bills and laws affecting subsistence farmers without consulting the farmers first. The rule of law helps to enforce reforms that would improve farmer’s productivity

Conclusion

In order to improve the food security of the subsistence farmers in Guatemala much must be addressed. Changes in the government need to be made if the food insecurity of subsistence farmers is to be improved. A more democratic approach needs to be taken to ensure that the subsistence farmers have a voice that is heard as the majority in their society. The property rights and registry of Guatemala need to be resolved in order for subsistence farmers to gain productive land. The rule of law should be enforced to provide equal justice to the subsistence farmers. Responsible government leaders, who will work to improve the lives of the subsistence families, need to be brought into power. A democratic election of leaders would be a huge first step in improving the situation. Without a change in the government, equality and power cannot be brought to the subsistence farmers.

The United Nations can provide support and assist with a plan of action to help the Guatemalan government ensure that a more accountable, transparent, and democratic government is formed. The United Nations can also work with local governments to help bring market information to the farmers and encourage the supply and demand of locally produced goods to help subsistence farmers produce more than just subsistence crops. The United Nations’ World Food Program can assist by providing relief to the victims of the 36-year civil war, help reduce chronic malnutrition, and strengthen Guatemala’s capacity to

reduce hunger until the country has seen the positive affects of the government reform. Since the United States and the World Bank helped to pressure Guatemala into the use of their current agricultural system, which has left subsistence farmers in poverty, they should provide funding for the education and support of the farmers. Farmers need to be informed to effectively and powerfully change their farming techniques, gain land, and have more power and representation in the government. In addition, the USAID should continue its work to make a more responsive government in Guatemala.

The lives of Guatemalan subsistence farmers are plagued by chronic malnutrition, poverty, inequality, and unfair land distribution. The inequality between the indigenous subsistence farmers and the wealthy Ladinos has displaced the subsistence farmers of Guatemala from productive farmlands. In order to improve these circumstances, diplomatic relations with the United States and World Bank need to be improved. Through the development of a trustworthy and democratic government in Guatemala, more and more of the farmers can become voters and have a voice. These steps will help ensure progress in the livelihood of the subsistence farmers of Guatemala. As Adrienne Rich once said, "If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up."

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