FOR BETTER COMMUNITY

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A Note from The Founder

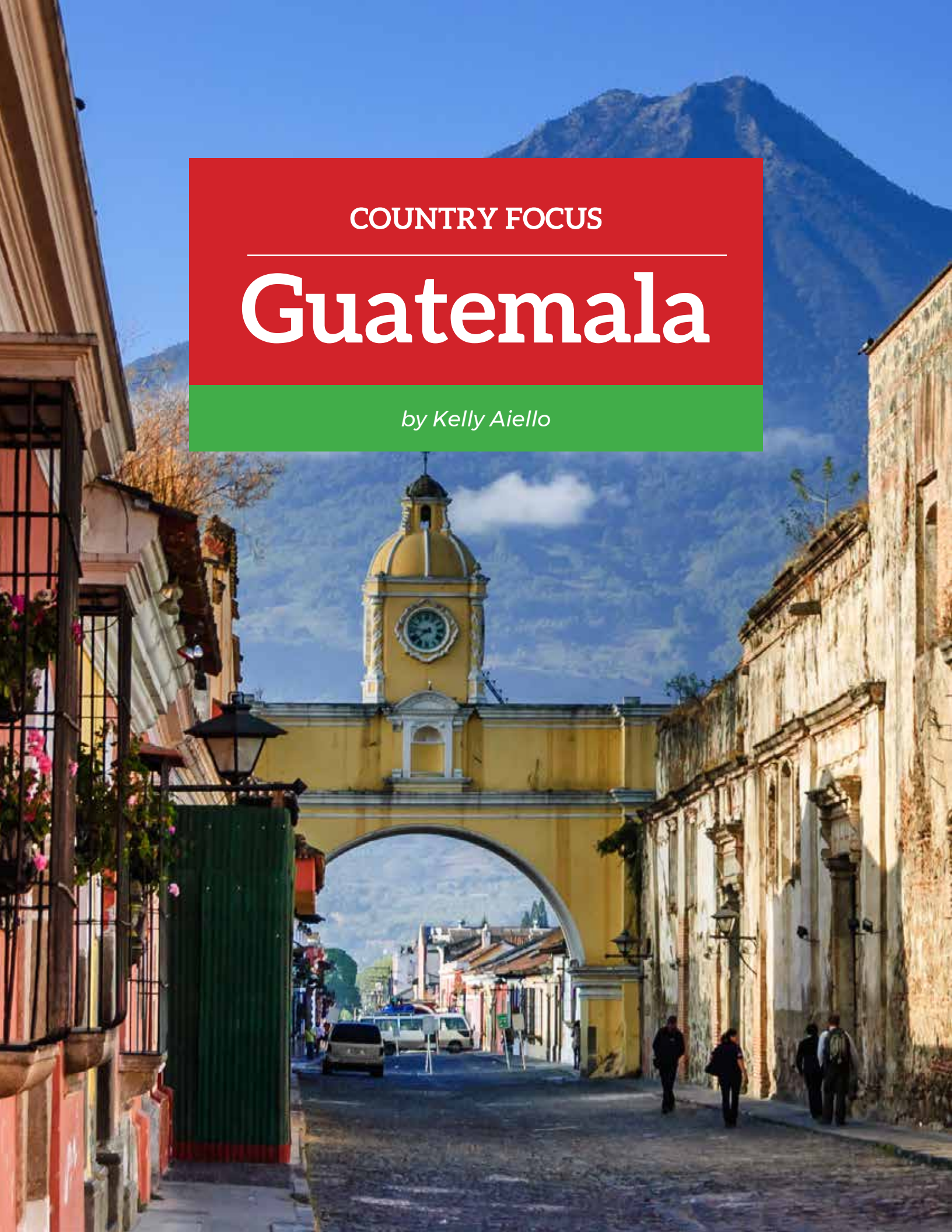
by Patrick Lussier

The last few months have been, to say the least, tumultuous for everyone across the globe. But we march forward with strength and resilience - as is the human thing to do.

In the second issue of our magazine, we shift our focus to Guatemala. We will be discussing issues related to poverty, corruption, inequality, and conflicts in the country. The intention is to educate the reader on the current situation in Guatemala from a socio-economic and political perspective such that we are in a better position to make a positive impact.

You will also find an article based on on-field research at the end of the issue. One of our Honduran reporters made her way to the slums of Honduras to give us an in-depth account of the realities of those plagued by poverty in her country. Here, you will meet a 90-year-old Ciriaca and an 11-year-old Marlen. People for who, we will make a difference with the Santa Cruz Project.

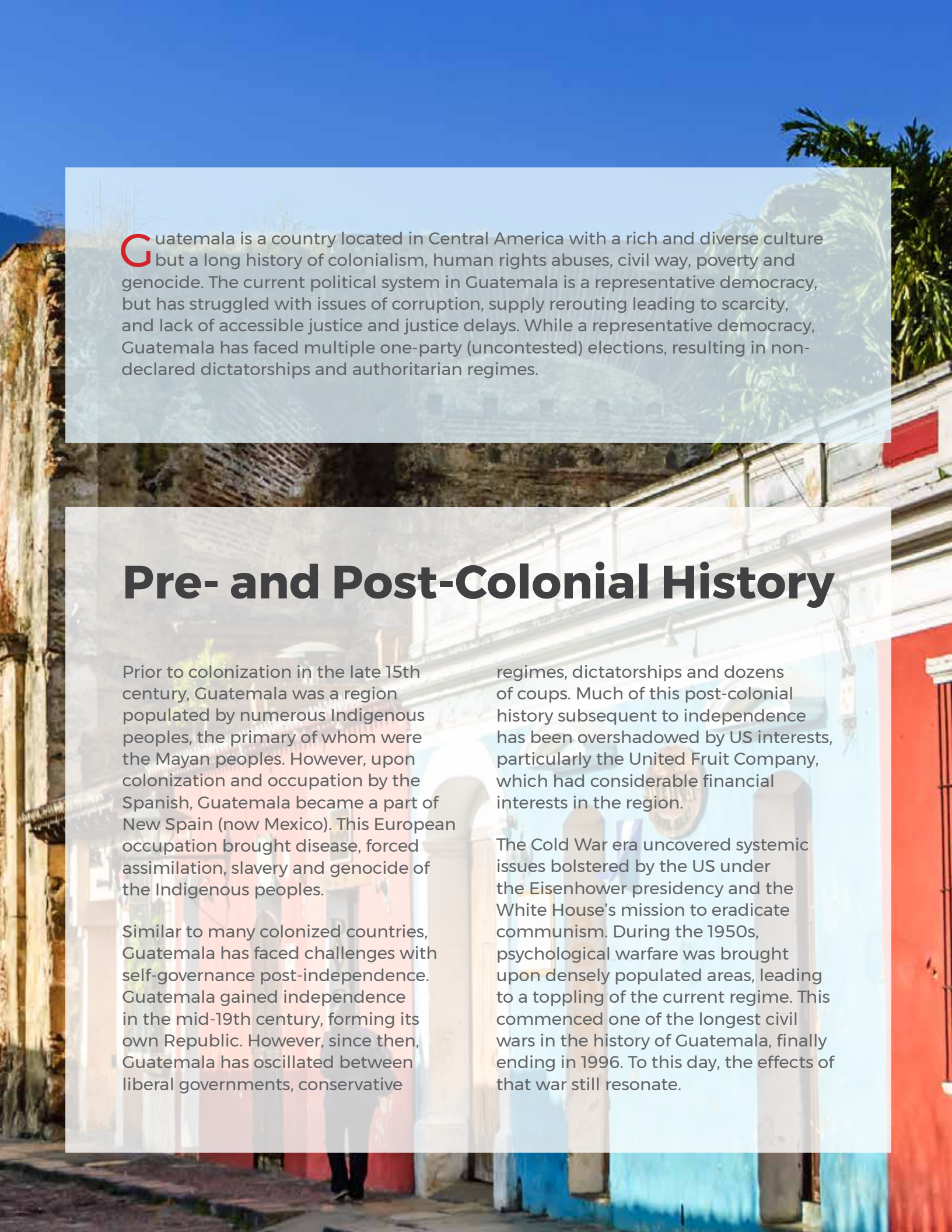
We hope the reader finds the content within these pages to be of value and to find it within themselves to help us make an impact. ForBetterCommunity intends to make a difference and we need your support in order to make the world a better, more equitable place. ■



COUNTRY FOCUS

Guatemala

by Kelly Aiello



Guatemala is a country located in Central America with a rich and diverse culture but a long history of colonialism, human rights abuses, civil way, poverty and genocide. The current political system in Guatemala is a representative democracy, but has struggled with issues of corruption, supply rerouting leading to scarcity, and lack of accessible justice and justice delays. While a representative democracy, Guatemala has faced multiple one-party (uncontested) elections, resulting in non-declared dictatorships and authoritarian regimes.

Pre- and Post-Colonial History

Prior to colonization in the late 15th century, Guatemala was a region populated by numerous Indigenous peoples, the primary of whom were the Mayan peoples. However, upon colonization and occupation by the Spanish, Guatemala became a part of New Spain (now Mexico). This European occupation brought disease, forced assimilation, slavery and genocide of the Indigenous peoples.

Similar to many colonized countries, Guatemala has faced challenges with self-governance post-independence. Guatemala gained independence in the mid-19th century, forming its own Republic. However, since then, Guatemala has oscillated between liberal governments, conservative regimes, dictatorships and dozens of coups. Much of this post-colonial history subsequent to independence has been overshadowed by US interests, particularly the United Fruit Company, which had considerable financial interests in the region.

The Cold War era uncovered systemic issues bolstered by the US under the Eisenhower presidency and the White House's mission to eradicate communism. During the 1950s, psychological warfare was brought upon densely populated areas, leading to a toppling of the current regime. This commenced one of the longest civil wars in the history of Guatemala, finally ending in 1996. To this day, the effects of that war still resonate.

Demographics

Almost half of Guatemala's over 17M population is Mayan, the other half being Ladino, and the remainder comprising mixed ethnicities and other various Indigenous peoples. As such, while the official language of Guatemala is Spanish, over twenty variations of Mayan is spoken by a large portion of the population. Very little English is spoken.

Guatemala has one of the youngest demographics in the world, the median age being around twenty years old. This is a reflection of living conditions, high maternal mortality and high infant mortality rates. The majority of mortality challenges are in Indigenous communities, who have faced ongoing genocide either through assimilation and erasure, supplies scarcity (including healthcare resources), and outright mass-murders. This is still a significant issue Guatemala faces today.

Education

The educational system in Guatemala is both free and mandatory for up to six years. However, at around 75% literacy, Guatemala has the lowest literacy rate in Central America. Indigenous educational achievement and access is considerably lower than non-Indigenous populations. There is a significant gender inequality in the educational system as a result of patriarchal expectations where girls and women are expected to leave school early to perform domestic duties.

Recruitment and training of teachers remains a challenge and primary barrier for education, and high dropout rates impact many Guatemalans. Further, access to safe water, nutrition, sewage and transportation remains a barrier to quality education.

Healthcare

Sexual and reproductive healthcare is woefully inadequate in Guatemala for many reasons. The proposal of the Life and Family Protection bill in 2018 proposes the stripping of all education, accessibility and choice for women and girls, and can result in up to life in jail. Because of this, many victims of sexual assault as well as women's healthcare is at risk.

Vaccine-preventable diseases pose a significant risk to Guatemalans due to supplies and medical staff shortage, particularly in rural and Indigenous regions. As of 2020, a significant dengue outbreak is of critical concern, compounding the already staggering COVID-19 burden.

Psychological and mental health services are little to non-existent in Guatemala, particularly for victims of sexual assault and trauma.

Human Rights

Guatemala has a long and complicated history of human rights abuses and access to justice. Genocide of Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ populations and murdered journalists pose an ongoing challenge for Guatemalans. In 2019, Human Rights Watch has outlined the Guatemalan government's failure to take action towards prosecution of actors of human rights abuses, among whom are former Congress members, former ministers, and former Vice-President Roxana Baldetti and former President Otto Pérez. In July, a joint agreement was signed by Guatemalan and US governments to establish Guatemala as a "safe third country." This agreement does not itemize any actionable implementations.

Access to public security and justice is little to non-existent for many Guatemalans. Extortion and violence continues to be an issue among police and officials, as does justice for the lynching and murder of a concerning number of Indigenous people and women perpetrated by Christian extremists. The most recent case of Indigenous murder was in early June 2020, Guatemalan Mayan spiritual guide, Domingo Choc Che. His murder came as a result of torture and burning as a result of being accused of witchcraft. His murder was filmed and released to the general public.

Future Focus

While there are many barriers and challenges facing Guatemala right now, there are also many actionable steps towards reparation and the beginnings of prosperity for the small country.

Access to education for all Guatemalans is paramount to removal of stigma, lowering poverty and providing opportunities for marginalized communities particularly. In order to do so, providing resources directly to the most vulnerable communities, including clean water, nutrition and basic healthcare including women's health and mental health, are paramount to this endeavour.

Further, condoning the actions of the current US Administration for the unlawful detention of Guatemalan refugees and subsequent deportation, particularly during the current COVID-19 pandemic, will help to raise global awareness and pressure the US Administration into constructive and positive actions. Working with media outlets to bring more awareness to this issue will also help bolster the pressure on administrations.

Lastly, working with NGOs and world governmental bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, to work towards equitable and accessible solutions will help encourage awareness and provide Guatemalans with the essential services needed to work towards a more sustainable and, hopefully, prosperous future.

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Guatemalan-Belizean Territorial Dispute and its Implications for the Border Population

by Lea Bidiville

Since gaining independence in 1821, Guatemala has refused to recognize all or part of Belize, its small English-speaking neighbor. Under the terms of a 2008 agreement, this long-running territorial dispute will soon head to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. While this enduring territorial dispute plays out in the higher spheres of government, border populations - especially on the Belizean side - pay a high price for the conflict between the Guatemalan and Belizean governments.

A Long-Standing History of Territorial Dispute

The territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize was inherited by both countries from their previous colonial powers, the United Kingdom and Spain. Following its conquest of the region in the 16th century, Spain claimed sovereignty over all of Central America. In the 17th century, the British settlers and their slaves arrived in present-day Belize, but they were considered outlaws by Spain. The Spanish crown signed several treaties with Great Britain during the 18th century, granting certain rights to the British settlers but retaining absolute sovereignty.

However, by the time Guatemala gained independence in 1821, the British settlers had pushed the boundaries of what would become the state of Belize southward, and the British government persuaded the new Guatemalan government to sign a border treaty in 1859, known as the Wyke-Aycinena Treaty. Three years later, the British government officially established the colony of British Honduras that officially changed its name to Belize in 1973.

This Anglo-Guatemalan Treaty was ratified by both sides, but it was unilaterally abrogated by Guatemala in 1939 on the grounds that the British side had not fulfilled one of the articles, namely the construction of a road from Guatemala to Punta Gorda, Belize. Guatemala now claimed the whole territory and refused to recognize Belize when it became independent in 1981, but eventually recognized it a decade later. However, it soon became clear that Guatemala still did not accept the boundaries, claiming roughly half of Belize's territory.

Fruitless bilateral negotiations continued until 2008, when a special agreement was signed committing both sides to take the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), subject to a referendum in each country. In 2018, Guatemala held their referendum, and despite having a low turnout of 26%, a vast majority of the votes approved settling the dispute at the ICJ. A year later, Belizeans also accepted via a national referendum the proposition to bring the dispute to the ICJ.

Settling the Dispute at the International Court of Justice

The ICJ is set to weigh in on the long-standing territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize. Once the case begins rolling at the court, it could take up to five years before judges can deliver a final verdict.

The decision to bring the sensitive case to the ICJ is much more controversial in Belize than it is in Guatemala. This is understandable, as Belize faces the possibility of losing a large chunk of territory that it already occupies, while Guatemala only stands to lose a claim to territory that it does not actually possess.

Yet, it seems like Belize likely has the upper hand in this conflictive situation. Indeed, the judges will first look at the relevant international treaties, including the above-mentioned Wyke-Aycinena Treaty. If the court finds the treaty valid, it will largely settle the case. Given that the 1859 Treaty was ratified by both sides and implemented by Guatemala for 80 years; that it specifies the boundaries of Belize in details; that Guatemala has never occupied any part of Belize; and that Belizean boundaries have been recognized by practically all independent states, it can almost certainly be concluded that the court's final ruling will confirm the current territorial boundaries of Belize.

The consequences of the dispute for the border population

The border problem between Guatemala and Belize represents a great obstacle to combating illicit trade in the region. Illegal fishing, illegal settlements, illegal farming, poaching of wildlife, illegal harvest of forest products, robberies, ambush attacks on the Belizean military and murders on both sides of the border are common practice in the region.

Incursions up to 60 kilometers inside Belizean territory from the borderline at the Chiquibul Forest Reserve on the western border have been observed. The Chiquibul forest seems to be the main gateway for Guatemalans entering Belizean territory, where the primary illegal activities include milpa farming and hunting by Guatemalans. For milpa farming, large areas of the forests have been cleared. This causes destruction of entire ecosystem habitats of several species of plants and animals.

Among the most significant conflicts are the harvesting of forest products, particularly the exploitation of the precious palm Chamaedorea, locally known as xate. It has been estimated that no fewer than 1000 xate collectors (xateros) have illegally crossed into Belize to exploit this highly coveted plant since the 1970s. Several areas in Belizean territory are believed to be too risky to patrol because Guatemalan xateros have been found to be armed with rifles and guns, which poses serious threats to the security and life of the local Belizean population.

The destruction and theft of equipment by xateros is another problem. Solar panels from a gold-mining station in the Chiquibul forest in Belize have been stolen. Staff members at this gold-mining station feel intimidated by the presence of Guatemalan xateros, and, in order to avoid confrontations, they provide them with food and water.

But illegal harvest of forest product is not the only illicit trade in the area. It has also been reported that violent drug cartels threatening locals engage in a near-constant flow of drugs along the length of the border.

Although Belizean law stipulates penalties on persons found guilty of illegal harvest of forest products, illegal entry into territory and illegal use of weapons, the remoteness and the rugged terrain of the border area are barriers to enforcement; it takes at least seven days to get to the sites where illegal activities are happening. In addition, a lack of manpower along with a lack of finances to carry out patrols makes it even more difficult to enforce penalties.

The Way Forward

The damage done to Belize's ecosystem and human life are significant and need to end. The current situation is clearly not sustainable neither for Belizeans nor Guatemalans constantly risking their life in the jungles of Belize and ignore the dangers of getting lost.

In the light of all these concerns, the settlement of the Guatemala-Belize territorial dispute at the ICJ will likely offer a solution in theory, assuming that the court's final ruling confirms the current Belizean boundaries. Yet in practice, the court's decision will not change the current state of affairs. Because the settlement of the dispute at the ICJ makes no provision for offering sustainable solutions - such as work opportunities and sufficient means of subsistence - to Guatemalans, illegal crossings and activities on Belizean territory will continue.

What is needed more than ever is the opportunity to provide Guatemalans making a living from cross-border illicit activities with alternative livelihoods on Guatemalan territory and offer them the means to work and live decently. Failing to do so, conflict between Guatemalans and Belizeans will continue and Guatemalans will keep on crossing the border and risking their lives to sustain themselves and their families.

He is truly great who hath a great charity.

- Thomas à Kempis

Combating the Scourge of Poverty and Inequality in Guatemala

by Lea Bidiville

Guatemala has experienced continued economic stability and has been a solid economic performer in recent years. Strategically located, with substantial natural resources and a young multiethnic population, Guatemala has enormous potential to generate growth and prosperity for its people. But Guatemala's stability has not translated into growth acceleration to close the income gap with rich countries.

The enduring problem of poverty and inequality

Guatemala's poverty and inequality problem is alarming. According to the World Bank, 61.6 per cent of the Guatemalan population in 2019 lives below the poverty line. In addition, it is estimated that 23 per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty.

Poverty is predominantly rural, and higher among the indigenous communities. The indigenous population also suffers from discrimination and exclusion in Guatemalan society, which makes it difficult for them to rise out of poverty. The country's topography also keeps indigenous people living in rural areas isolated from the rest of society, making it more difficult for them to receive help.

While pockets of poverty pepper the country, there is also a significant ''poverty belt' in the Northern and North-Western regions. On the other hand, poverty is significantly lower in the metropolitan region around the capital Guatemala City.

Income inequality is also particularly high in Guatemala. According to a study conducted by the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), 0.001 per cent of the population owns more than half of the country's wealth.

In essence, there are "two Guatemalas", one with well-off and one poor, one urban and one rural, with large gaps in both social and economic outcomes.

Poverty alleviation efforts in Guatemala

The Peace Accords in 1996 ended 36 years of civil war and represent a turning point for Guatemala's development path, paving the way for a transformation to a more prosperous and inclusive nation. Since then, Guatemala has taken important development measures, with progress in the coverage and equity of education and basic services. Importantly, these steps signal that progress is possible, despite the magnitude of the challenges of changing the course of history.

In 2002, the Guatemalan government outlined its poverty reduction strategy in an important policy document "Estrategia de Reducción de la Pobreza" (ERP). General principles emphasized in the ERP include among others: rural development, promoting growth with equity, and emphasizing access to healthcare, education and food security.

The ERP showed mixed results in terms of poverty reduction. In fact, the incidence of poverty in Guatemala was estimated at 56 per cent in 2002, but raised to almost 62 per cent in 2019.

Last year, the Guatemalan government presented a national development plan called "K'atun: Nuestra Guatemala 2032", laying the foundations for a new management process and a sustainable development by 2032. With its new development plan, the Guatemalan government places great emphasis on five

priority axes; rural and urban Guatemalans, wellbeing and personal development, economic resources for everyone, natural resources management, and the guarantee of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

More precisely, priority is given to facilitated access to basic and health services, food and nutritional security, education, and decent employment and housing.

Priority challenges

Public investment is essential to achieving Guatemala's development goals, yet it remains constrained by a lack of resources. With central government's revenue averaging only 10 per cent of GDP in 2019, the main fiscal challenge of Guatemala is the need to raise additional revenues to finance key public investment projects.

Priority challenges in Guatemala include building opportunities and assets, reducing vulnerability, and improving institutions and empowering communities.

Creating opportunities and building assets is absolutely crucial in order to reduce poverty and inequality. Economic growth is a powerful force for poverty reduction and essential for expanding economic opportunities for poor people. Improving livelihoods particularly for the rural poor, as well as improving education and educational outcomes, also present challenges for both the poverty and peace agendas in Guatemala. Special efforts should be made to improve access to healthcare and combat malnutrition. In addition, developing the Guatemalan road network, its quality and dependability is central in order to avoid isolation and create opportunities for those living in remote places.

Vulnerability reduction presents another important challenge for poverty alleviation in Guatemala. The limited assets of the poor makes them particularly vulnerable to the impact of adverse shocks as they lack the means to cope with them. With a wave of recent shocks - such as the 2018 Volcán de Fuego eruption - the issue of vulnerability needs to take center stage in policy discussion. Therefore, in order to reduce poverty and vulnerability, considerable improvements in providing adequate social protection to all Guatemalans need to be undertaken.

The Guatemalan government also needs to commit to putting great efforts in building institutions and empowering communities. One of the key challenges for the poverty agenda is the modernization of the state. Indeed, poverty is not only the result of economic processes, but also of interacting economic, social and political forces. In particular, it is driven by the accountability and responsiveness of state institutions. A strong emphasis should also be placed on social institutions (kinship systems, community organizations, and informal networks) to help communities manage public goods, cope with risks and shocks, and leverage external assistance.

Overcoming poverty and inequalities

Given its abundance of natural resources and its substantial climate advantage, Guatemala has what it takes to overcome the ongoing problems of poverty and inequalities. While there is no single blueprint for poverty reduction, there are some key levers that take central stage for national efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Additionally, poverty reduction is a multi-dimensional and long-term process. Efforts should be made to attack the poverty problem from a multitude of angles, including those to foster opportunity, build assets, reduce vulnerability, and improve public and social institutions and empower communities.

By supporting charities and non-profit organizations advocating for social changes and empowering local communities, we can work towards a fairer and more peaceful world free from discrimination that guarantees each and everyone a decent standard of living.

Indigenous People of Guatemala

A Reflection of the Mayan Past

by Kelly Aiello

Who Were the Mayans?

When we think of Mayans, we think of ancient civilizations, mysterious architecture anchored spiritually in the natural landscape in which they lived. The Mayans were a diverse Mesoamerican civilization, spanning across much of Central America, with advanced governance, economy and culture. A large part of that culture and economy were facilitated by their highly sophisticated language, mathematics, calendar systems based on astrological understanding, art and architecture.

But contrary to popular belief, the Mayans weren't a single Indigenous group of people, but a multitude of unique ethno-linguistic groups, and did not identify as a common people with political unity or culture. Reflecting this misunderstanding, the modern term 'Mayan' is an umbrella phrase that was never adopted by their namesake.

Where Are Their Descendants Now?

While the Mayans themselves no longer exist, most of the Guatemalan Indigenous population are descendants of different Mayan tribes, many of whom carry echoes of their homeland's Indigenous and colonial past. Almost 30 percent of Mayan-descent Indigenous peoples live in poverty in Guatemala and comprise almost 6 million people. However, alternative reports suggest that Indigenous people in Guatemala make up almost 60 percent of the population.

This is a staggering difference and suggests that inclusion in the realms of political participation, healthcare, employment, income, housing and education are lacking in these demographics.

Despite this narrative of colonialism and oppression, Guatemalan Indigenous peoples have a rich cultural heritage that continues to this day.

Rich Culture

Guatemalan Indigenous peoples carry an abundant oral tradition of story-telling, including mythos and spirituality. This tradition is complex, diverse and born from the ancient Mayan traditions, and is reflected in many facets of their modern culture.

Religion

Many Indigenous people can be found in the highlands where their religious beliefs are as a result of religious syncretism: a blend of religious beliefs into a single, new system.

Indigenous Guatemalans believe in a deity called Maximón, also known as San Simón. Maximón has different iterations, but is primarily the patron saint of health, crops, marriage, business, revenge and death. This more modern deity is believed to be a blend of several historical and religious characters, a variety of whom stem from Spanish-influenced Catholicism and ancient traditional beliefs.

Coffee

One can't talk about Guatemala without talking about the coffee as it is known to be some of the best coffee in the world.

Coffee crops were introduced to Guatemala in the mid-19th century. Coffee fields today are primarily worked by Indigenous peoples, and have become a major national export.

However, unethical labor practices are common. Exploitation of children, extremely low wages, and employment instability plagues the coffee industry in Guatemala, creating a fragile situation for Indigenous peoples.

Recently, many Western coffee companies have endeavored to promote sustainable and equitable business practices, outsourcing their coffee needs directly from Indigenous farmers.

Cacao Beans and Chocolate

While import of cacao leaves into most Western nations is prohibited, the beans are the primary ingredient for chocolate. Yes, chocolate! Guatemalan chocolate, like its coffee, remains some of the best in the world.

But this isn't chocolate from your local grocery store. The Mayans had a cultural and spiritual relationship with chocolate, the recipe of which is still used today. The beans of the cacao trees are crushed and mixed into a paste together with water, cornmeal, chili peppers and other species. Mayan chocolate isn't the sweet, creamy treat we know, but a dark, slight bitter and spicy delight. Chocolate and cacao bean trade was a major source of economy for the Mayans and is still for many Indigenous peoples.

The Mayans' spiritual connection with chocolate stemmed from their belief that the cacao beans were food of the gods. It was drunk ritualistically as a representation of the consumption of the spirit made flesh.

Today, much of the cacao grown in Guatemala is done so by smallholder farmers and cooperatives. There is the ongoing challenge however of inequitable trade between larger food companies sourcing chocolate from Guatemala. But this has been shifting recently with more focus and funding being applied to these smaller farmers and cooperatives where a major bulk of profits go directly to the communities.

Indigenous Textiles

The Indigenous textiles of Guatemala are stunning. Specifically, two etho-linguistic groups have strong weaving traditions: the Kaqchikel and K'che', both of whom are Mayan-descendents. While these textiles were once worn by all genders, they are now primarily worn by women, and the textile industry is very much a female-oriented occupation.

Different colors and weavings, created with natural dyes, are unique to each Indigenous village and are individually distinguishable. These designs are a reflection of their Mayan heritage and mirror ancient Mayan art and religious beliefs.

Similarly to coffee and chocolate, weaving cooperatives and textile-exports help sustain villages and keep this tradition alive. However, there is still considerable exploitation of weavers, resulting in cyclic poverty and degradation of both quality and cultural respect of textiles.

As of 2019, Indigenous peoples of Guatemala are calling for reworking of legislative protections in an effort to bolster local community economies while maintaining the cultural value of these textiles.

Economic Prospects

The economic prospects for Indigenous peoples of Guatemala are abundant, provided the right infrastructures and support is available. Creating partnerships between local farmers and cooperatives and distributors abroad, with a focus on sustainability, is crucial for keeping both these communities and Mayan cultural heritage alive.

Non-profit organizations can work as facilitators for this, working in these local communities to help understand the needs. Creating bridges between Western businesses and local producers will help lift Indigenous communities, while governmental lobbying for more sustainable and equitable legislation that allows farmers and cooperatives to maintain control over their goods, their local economies and their heritage is the mandate of many organizations.

To find out more about what For Better Community is doing in Guatemala, and to see how you can help, contact us. We want to be that bridge.

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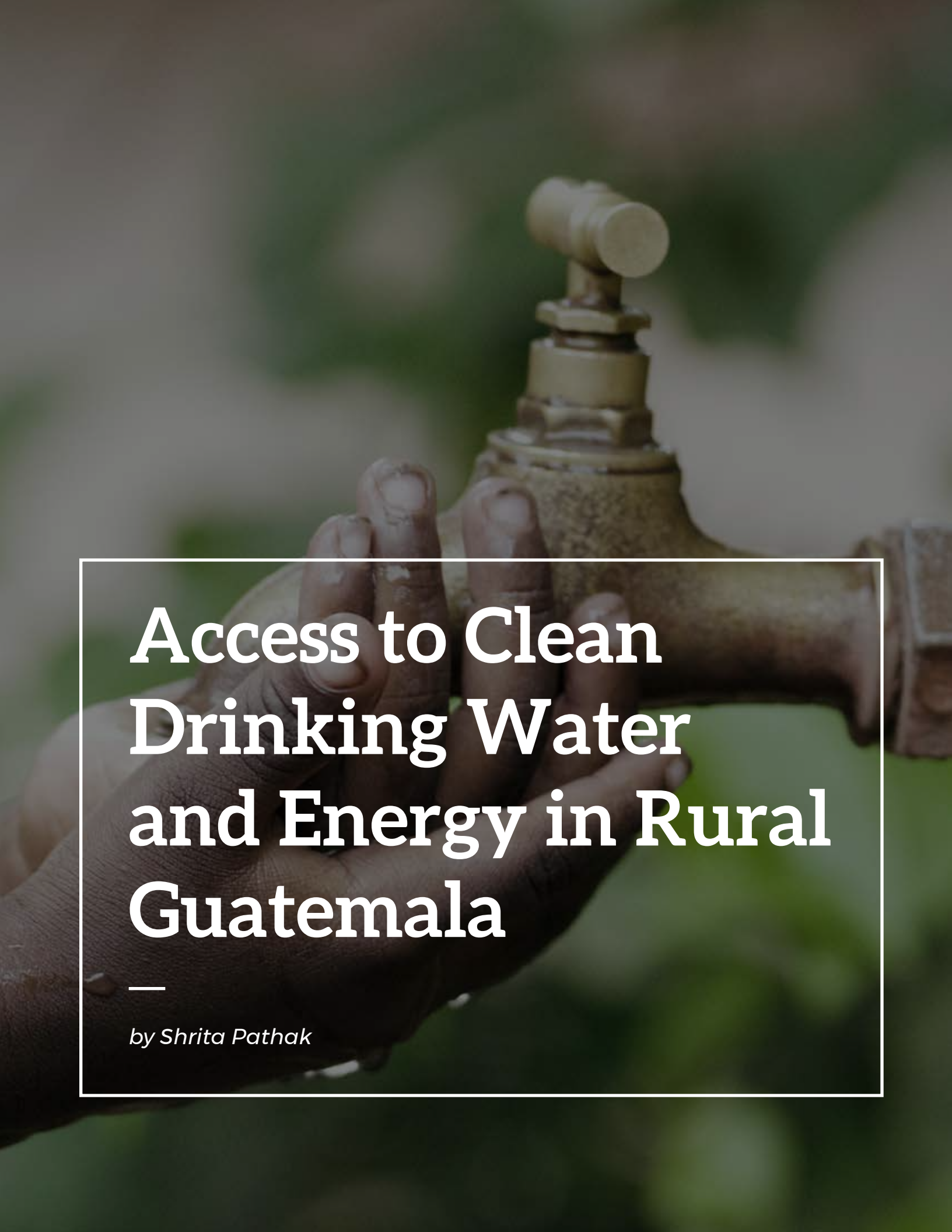


Access to Clean Drinking Water and Energy in Rural Guatemala

by Shrita Pathak

Guatemala is the third biggest nation by size and first by population in Central America. It is also the region's largest economy, and while growth has been rising steadily in recent years, not all sections of the society are reaping benefits of this growth. This is especially true in the case of indigenous populations, which receives well below their fair share of economic prosperity.

The Gini index is a statistical measure used to gauge the level of economic inequality within the nation. A Gini index of zero implies complete equality within the nation. Conversely, an index score of 100 means complete inequality i.e. the higher the index, the more unequally distributed are the resources within a given society. According to estimates by the CIA, Guatemala's Gini index was 53 in 2014. By comparison, Sweden's index stood at 24.9 in 2013 and Slovenia's at 24.4 in 2016.

Further, the nation suffers from organized crime, drug trafficking, a high rate of malnutrition, and a high infant mortality rate. Along with this, the coronavirus pandemic has been detrimental to the Guatemalan economy, which is set to decline by 1.8 percent as a result of COVID, according to the World Bank.

Guatemala and Access to Clean Drinking Water

Access to clean drinking water and sanitation is a basic necessity to ensure that citizens of a nation remain healthy and active. Sustainable Development Goal target 6.1 calls for universal and equitable access to safe affordable drinking water. Lack of access to safe drinking water has, after all, been linked to diseases such as typhoid, polio, diarrhea and cholera. With improved sources of accessible drinking water, people also spend lesser time collecting water, which has a positive impact on the economy.

With almost half of the country's population living below USD 5.5 (and 8.7 percent below USD 1.9) per day, it is safe to assume that much of the population is not getting access to clean and safe water. Access to WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) services is often limited by factors such as income levels, geography, ethnicity, and education. A 2018 report by the World Bank shows that while 88 percent of those living in urban areas have access to safe drinking water, only 61 percent in rural areas do too. Researchers at the Unit of Hydrochemistry of the Insivumeh found that river water samples showed the existence of bacteriological contamination. This contamination is present in more populous areas since the drains of the houses directly

flow into water bodies such as rivers. Only five percent of sewage in Guatemala gets treated. Poor people dwelling in rural areas use this contaminated water as drinking water and to wash their clothes with.

The report asserts that a lack of national leadership and support to rural areas is to a great degree to blame for its improper WASH facilities. It calls for the needs of the most vulnerable populations to be addressed. For this, institutional reforms at the national and lower levels are crucial. Further, the nation should prioritize WASH in its budget. In order to close the geographical gap, the report states, a “dedicated sector policy that clearly defines the provision and quality of services in rural areas, with an emphasis on rural sanitation and hygiene” is needed. Policies, planning instruments, and the budget must be in alignment in order to ensure policies prioritizing WASH are implemented properly.

Energy in Rural Areas

Affordable and clean energy is the seventh Sustainable Development Goal. Access to electricity is a necessary prerequisite to the social and economic development of a nation - it helps alleviate poverty, boosts innovation, improves the standard of living, and makes society all-around more productive and efficient. A 2018 paper found that women in rural areas in the country increase their time working for money by two to three hours per day as a result of electrification.

In 1998, 60 percent of households in Guatemala had electricity. By 2018, 95 percent of the population (96 percent urban and 94 percent rural) has access to electricity. In order to modernize the electricity sector and expand its reach to rural areas, the government created a Rural Electrification Plan (PER) in the 1990s. Under this plan, households that were more than 200 metres away from an existing grid were targeted. The plan also called for greater cooperation from private companies. Along with this, a uniform price of USD 650 was selected for every connection. Since connections closer to the grid would cost far lesser to make that those further away, private company DISCOS did not have any incentive to make connections to the remotest parts of the country, especially since the contract did not state any penalties either.

Recent evidence, however, shows that some of the remote areas in Guatemala have been hit with regular power and bills those living in extreme poverty simply cannot afford. Take, for instance, the case of residents of Chisec municipality in north-central Guatemala, who took to the streets in 2018 in protest after the electricity of 38 communities in the area was suspended. The company claims that this was done after

the residents refused to pay their bills. The villagers asserted that they stopped paying up since they simply couldn't afford the price - they called these bills "robbery."

The second aspect of the seventh SDG, along with access to energy, is access to clean energy. Guatemala has prioritized reducing its dependency on non-renewable sources of energy, with firewood representing the main sources of energy for households. The country is projected to generate around 60 percent of domestic electricity from renewable sources of energy by 2027. One of the biggest challenges the nation has to face in this regard has to do with assuring eco-friendly provision of energy systems along with meeting its social and economic objectives.

The Political Legacy of Guatemala:

Entrenched in Corruption?

by Shrita Pathak

Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America. It is also one of the fastest growing economies in the region with a growth rate of 4.1 percent. Though at a cursory glance this may seem like good news, one must keep in mind that the benefits often do not trickle down to the lower stratas of society. Poverty is still a huge problem in the country with almost half of the population living below USD 5.5 per day, as per World Bank's most recent data (2014). The size of the middle class has also shrunk from 21 percent in 2006 to only 15 percent in 2014, pointing towards the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Further, according to the IMF, Guatemala did not meet any of the Millennium Development Goals for its rural and indigenous populations in 2015.

Corruption within the nation is often cited as one of the biggest impediments to the making of a just and equal society. The country ranks 143 out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Along with impunity and drug trafficking, corruption and unequal access to resources can be seen as the largest obstacles to Guatemala's transition from an autocratic state to a democracy. While the nation has been governed by democratically elected officials since 1986, human rights violations and military oppression have continued to reign. This has led to democatic institutions remaining extremely fragile.

Take, for instance, the case of its former President Otto Pérez Molina and his vice president Roxana Baldest. They were in office from 2012 to 2015 and were charged with running a corruption and money laundering network. In Guatemala, the President is the head of the state, the government, and the multi-party system. The anti-corruption sentiment in the nation grew and led to the victory of Jimmy Morales as the president. He held office from 2016 to 2020. A comedian-turned-politician, Morales ran for president under the slogan "Not corrupt nor a thief," which makes it all the more disappointing when he also became indicted on corruption charges for illicit financing of his electoral campaign barely two years after assuming office.

Over the last decade, the people of Guatemala have demanded an end to this rampant corruption. The anti-corruption movement led to the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), whose purpose was to fight against corruption and impunity within the nation. The Public Prosecutor's Office, along with the CICIG, carried out more than 100 corruption investigations by 2019. Apart from battling corruption and fighting organized crime, the Commission was responsible for implementing some dozen reforms that successfully helped modernize the way investigations are carried out. Over the subsequent decade, as per the Commission's final report, it targeted over 1500 individuals. Of these, 660 were successfully prosecuted for high-level crimes. These include four presidents, judges, military persons, and powerful business people. According to the official CICIG websites, it's biggest achievement lies in "the creation of citizen consciousness regarding the importance of the culture of legality." An opinion poll revealed that 72 percent of people in Guatemala supported the Commission.

Despite the popular support, the Commission became the target of corrupt

elites within the nation that began a pro-impunity campaign. The intention behind this was three-fold: to denounce social leaders, protect elites by passing impunity laws, and turn against media outlets and local businesses that support the anti-corruption movement.

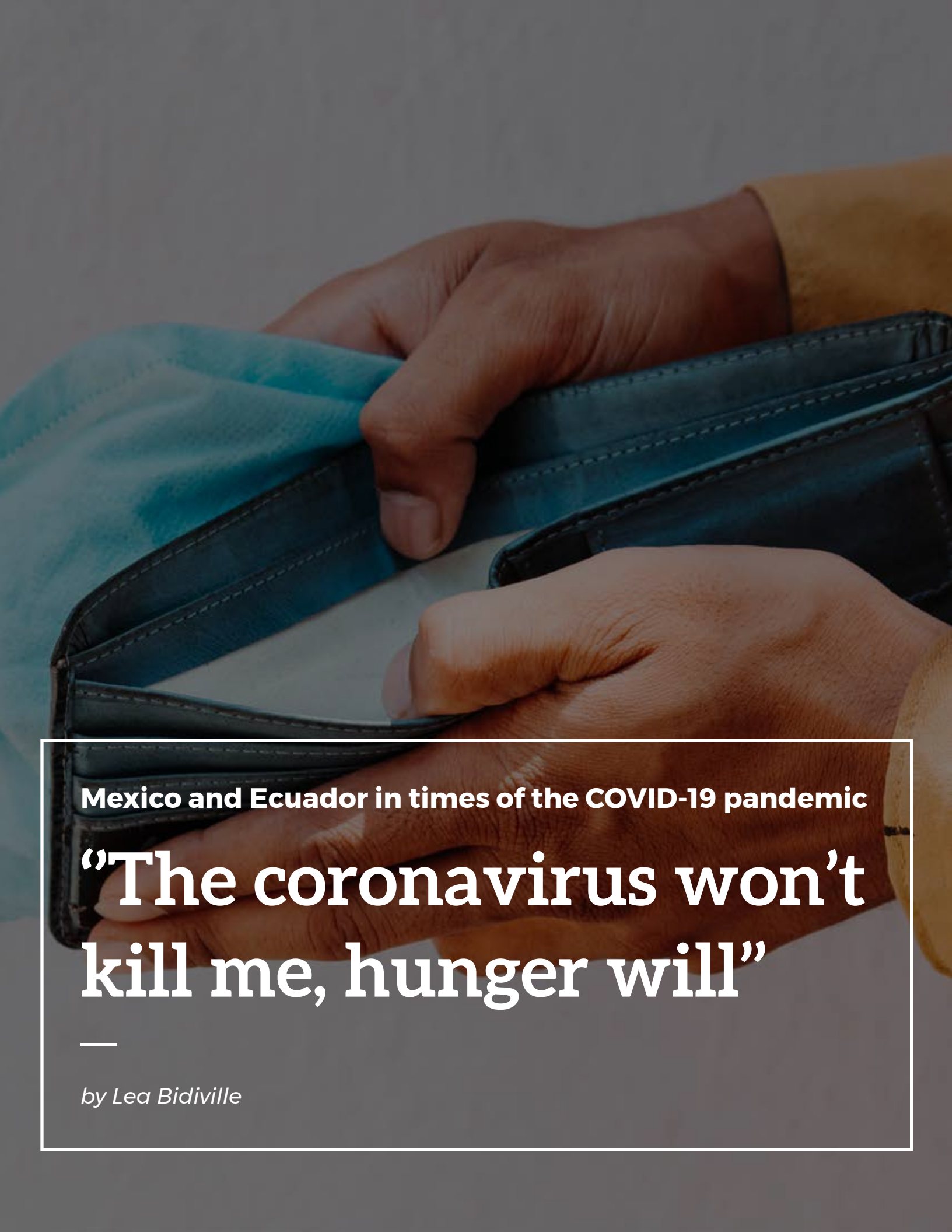
Uncovering the truth about Morales was one of CICIG's biggest victories. Two of the three impeachment votes he faced were a result of the work done by the Commission. It is no wonder that Morales's government began actively attempting to get rid of the Commission, along with dismantling the Attorney General's Office. A Senior Fellow at a D.C.-based think-tank WOLA believes that Morales' government "has done everything in its power to undermine the fight against corruption." So when in August 2018 the attorney general requested for renewal with the intention of stripping Morales' presidential immunity, Morales simply decided that his administration would simply refuse the request. Even though the decision to close Guatemala's doors to the CICIG was considered illegal by the courts, Morales continued with his decision and the Commission left Guatemala by the end of 2019.

With the Commission gone, corrupt elites in Guatemala have ventured to reverse any progress made by the anti-corruption movements and the investigations in the nation. Many candidates who were competing in the 2019 general election feared that the election would suffer from

crime, corruption, forced migrations, and lack of oversight, reported a Guardian article.

Guatemala's 2019 general elections were indeed reflective of Guatemalan people's falling hopes in the system and the democratic process. One needn't go beyond a brief discussion of some of the more popular candidates in order to understand the extent of this disappointment. Jurist Thelma Aldana, for instance, was disqualified from running due to a corruption scandal. Ironically, she was a CICIG collaborator. Former First Lady Sandra Torres, on the other hand, was widely seen to have criminal connections in addition to widespread suspicions over illegal financing of her 2015 election campaign. Though she escaped the charges in 2015, almost 30 percent respondents in a Gallup poll stated that they would never vote for her.

Conservative Alejandro Giammattei from the Vamos party won the 2019 elections. The surgeon's campaign included a dedication to fight crime and build a political force "with deep love for God, family and Guatemala." The new president has shown his seriousness to fighting corruption by signing an inter-institutional cooperation agreement and appointing a presidential commission against corruption. Now only time will tell whether Giammattei will be able to finally root out the insidious disease of corruption that plagues this Latin American nation.



Mexico and Ecuador in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

“The coronavirus won’t kill me, hunger will”

by Lea Bidiville

Jonathan and Belén respectively live in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico and Guayaquil, Ecuador. They have accepted to share their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and tell us more about the threats of hunger brought on by the COVID-19 in Mexico and Ecuador, two countries currently dealing with an important number of confirmed cases and high death rates.

Back in February, when the coronavirus struck Mexico and Ecuador, it put a great part of the Mexican and Ecuadorian populations at risk of not being able to properly feed themselves and their families. In Mexico and Ecuador, labor markets are precarious and informal. Remote work is an option only for high skilled workers. The hashtag #QuedateEnCasa (stay at home) seen all over social media soon became the privilege of a small fraction of Mexicans and Ecuadorians.

For the majority of Mexicans and Ecuadorians, lockdown means that it's impossible for them to earn any kind of income. Millions of domestic employees, agricultural workers and street vendors have suddenly found themselves without income. Additionally, with a significant part of the Mexican and Ecuadorian populations lacking unemployment insurance, the consequences for these informal workers operating outside the official channels are catastrophic. The International Labour Organization estimates that incomes in the informal work sector in Latin America have plummeted by 80%.

"Those who can stay at home, but Puerto Vallarta depends a lot on tourism", points out Jonathan, professional photographer based in Puerto Vallarta in the Mexican state of Jalisco. He adds that lockdown measures are largely being ignored by the underprivileged social classes who are struggling to make ends meet after the decline of tourism in Puerto Vallarta. The same problems are also observed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where Graphic and Audiovisual Designer Belén lives.

In addition to losses of income, prices of vegetables, fruits and dairy products in local markets in Ecuador have reportedly fluctuated wildly since the coronavirus crisis hit. But most of the prices are going in one direction: up. This observation was confirmed by Belén, although it now seems that prices have gone back to what they were before the onset of the pandemic. Belén explains that, for Ecuadorians living paycheck-to-paycheck, rising food prices coupled with lost incomes are forcing many to make tough choices. Some are limiting what foods they eat, or are deciding between putting food on the table and paying for other necessities. Some others continue working despite government restrictions and claim that the coronavirus won't kill them, but hunger will.

The trend of rising food costs is playing out because of a combination of disrupted supply chains, plummeting currencies and limits on key exports. Experts worry that the longer the coronavirus crisis lasts, the bigger the food problem will become - creating a perilous

cycle of uncertainty, supply, demand and hunger. Belén also reported that some local food merchants have taken advantage of the pandemic situation to dishonestly and exorbitantly raise their prices.

Lately, Jonathan has seen tensions arise between the Mexicans and their government. A certain sense of general despondency is tangible among the poorest Mexicans asking for concrete solutions to relaunch the economy. Nevertheless, calls for demonstrations on social media have brought together only very few people. In Ecuador, Belén has seen protests against the economic measures taken by the government (salary cuts in the public sector and allowing companies to make their employees redundant without offering a fair dismissal compensation) in several Ecuadorian cities, including Guayaquil, the epicenter of Ecuador's health crisis.

Emergency support for the most vulnerable

Belén mentions that the Ecuadorian government has distributed food bags - mostly unhealthy food - to the poorest. Whereas the Ecuadorian government has faced criticism for its response to coronavirus and its failure to provide its citizens with adequate first necessity products, the United Nations World Food Programme has taken over the government's duty by distributing food rations and cash or vouchers to the most vulnerable.

In Mexico, the government doesn't seem to acknowledge the scope of the current problem concerning food access and prices. Jonathan reports that bags of food and first necessity products have also been distributed to the most needy, but have been strongly criticized for their insufficient contents (sugar, tortilla, beans and water). Recent cases of cartels distributing supplies in Mexico suggest that the coronavirus pandemic has presented an opportunity to cultivate popular support and consolidate territorial control in areas where people are in desperate need of aid.

On the bright side, Jonathan notes that a large number of local businesses and restaurants in Puerto Vallarta have set up food banks and offer free meals thanks to the donations of individuals less impacted by the COVID-19, including American and Canadian expatriates spending winters in Puerto Vallarta.

Putting things in perspective

Insights into the pandemic situation in Mexico and Ecuador should invite citizens from privileged countries to put things in perspective and reconsider their own experience of this sanitary crisis. Despite the fact that the coronavirus pandemic is now present across the whole world, it has affected people in very diverse ways. Millions of individuals have lost their jobs not only in underdeveloped countries, but also in richer countries. Yet, the consequences are different and depend very much on whether we lose our job in a country with a formal or informal labor market. While the vast majority enjoy unemployment insurance in rich countries, that's not the case in countries where labor market is still largely informal and where people can not only lose their income overnight, but also be unable to afford food or pay their rent and bills. The current pandemic should therefore be seen as an invitation to reflect on the privileged situation of developed countries and play a part in poverty alleviation.

Can a food crisis be avoided?

According to Jonathan, Mexico has the resources to overcome the pandemic and avoid a severe food crisis. Nevertheless, if a solution to revitalise the Mexican economy and allow informal workers to get back to work safely isn't found any time soon, Jonathan fears a worsening of the current situation leading to violent demonstrations against the government and an increase of already high crime rates in poor areas. On the other hand, Belén isn't as confident as Jonathan with regard to the capability of Ecuador to overcome this health crisis. Belén raises the enduring problem of corruption as the main obstacle to find efficient solutions to fight the coronavirus and ward off a food crisis.

Jonathan considers that food banks represent only a short-term solution. Although they provide much needed help and immediate relief for the most vulnerable, food banks can't realistically help every Mexican severely affected by the coronavirus who are also facing additional expenses, such as rent and bills, for which no financial help has been offered. According to Belén, collaboration with charitable foundations and the creation of a trust fund managed by well known activists with no connection to the government or public companies are key to cater for the needs of those severely impacted by the pandemic and win the battle against the COVID-19.

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A look at the community of Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz is a village located on the east side of Honduras (Department of El Paraíso), 130 km away from Tegucigalpa. It has 3000 inhabitants, including 7 hamlets dependent on the community.

There is only one way to Santa Cruz, and you could easily miss it, because the community's sign fell on the ground, next to the sidewalk. On the right, there is the medical center and, on the left, the house from the community's oldest inhabitants.

The deans

They are doña Ciriaca Medina (90) and don Ladislao Rodríguez (92). Their youngest child, Oscar Tulio Rodríguez (48), stayed to take care of them.

The house is made of stone walls covered with lime, the paneling is made of wood, and the roof is made of tiles. Ciriaca's shoes are made of cloth and the right one has holes, her finger almost come out of it, she can't help her shoes being covered by dirt because they don't have glass on their windows, but she scrubs them with a broom that could have been long time gone to the recycling bin.

Oscar shows a small corn crop. To get there, you have to go through the latrine and bathroom. Here, the door is two pieces of torn blue cloth.

"What we grow here is to go pasando (to let it go as it does = to live day by day), I sell the extra to buy other food. I produce 2 cargas* (charges) of corn and I keep it in the house," tells Oscar, who reuses a metal barrel to preserve the grain.

By showing the container, Oscar hints at other realities: there are no closets, the clothes are kept in a cardboard box; two wooden bunks are used as beds by the elders and their son.

Santa Cruz medical center

Two auxiliary nurses take care of the 3000 inhabitants, Claudia Mendoza, a nurse for more than 20 years, is in charge. “We are creating the caseta del triaje (sorting room) for the pandemic”, she says.

The caseta is the area intended to receive N-COVID-19 patients, and is located above the septic tank. This decision is easily questionable, it looks like the sanitary rules aren’t respected, and although the medical center area is large, there was no other place with concrete. So, they took advantage of it. 4 vertical trunks supporting an improvised thick black plastic roof form the caseta.

Real poverty

The president of the Patronato, Arturo Aguilar (64) says that the santacruceños grow corn and beans, raise cattle and horses as well as chickens and ducks. He also says that 74% live in poverty, and among them, 20% live in extreme poverty.

“Prices for basic cereals don’t dan (give = don’t pay), crops are poor, we have a family land but we can’t cultivate it and can’t give work to others because herbicides and fertilizers are very expensive”.

This is probably why the modernity of some building contrasts with the rurality and poverty of others. It’s easy to explain, “the young people don’t want to work in the fields anymore, they prefer to emigrate or do an academic profession out of Santa Cruz”, explains the president of the Patronato.

Moving away from Santa Cruz, fills you with Sehnsucht (nostalgy), was saying C.S. Lewis, who defines it as a distant and desired place, like an aromatic spear piercing your mask, the sound of ducks whistling between the battered paths of the community, a place with people full of talent and desire to progress with their crops.

Conclusions

The community of Santa Cruz has several essentials ingredients in order to become self-sufficient: the will of the population, a capable workforce and fertile land. However, they need outside help to build an adequate infrastructure to achieve long-term success.

Meet Marlen

Marlen is an 11 years old little girl, she lives with her father and her 13 years old brother, in Santa Cruz; The house is small, and there is a small hammock made of red bags in the little portal, as well as a rustic chair, handmade by the father.

Arriving to Santa Cruz medical center, a little girl was sitting in a chair, smiled at the camera and answered the greeting with much courtesy. She is Marlen.

If you know her, a piece of your heart will stay with her. It Will be impossible to forget her dark almond eyes and her shy smile, her curly hair tied up in a pony tail and her sweet singing voice when nobody sees her

She is a student promoted to 7th grade, the other children of her age are in 5th grade, Marlen Estela Centeno Padilla, has a A as school note, for her that's a regular note. Many children like her live-in extreme poverty.

Her school is closed due to the quarantine and she misses playing with her friends, even though her routine wasn't like the others.

"I woke up at 4 in the morning, because I had to make the corn tortillas and prepare breakfast for my father and my brother. Now,

with the pandemic I can't play, have recess, or do my homework to distract my mind anymore, and I wake up late", Marlen said.

Waking up late means starting the housework at 6 in the morning, making 60 tortillas and cooking breakfast. Then, Marlen sets the fire with white dirt, and after that she does the laundry. "I only do my father or brother's laundry when they are sick" she said frowning.

Some aspects of her routine are in plain sight, at the entrance of the house, in a small patio, is the place where she washes clothes by hand, the laundry room is made of two square stones, next to a blue barrel. Deteriorated black plastics isolate several areas, particularly where the family take their bath. There is also an improvised poultry house made of sticks, where there were chickens.

Anyways, the children are happy and, in the patio, Marlen finds round seeds in some fruits that together with a bouncing ball, make a game of Jack.

The little girl has already planned her future, with her first salary as a chief of Police, she will fix the street that leads to her home; with the second one, she will build a house for her father and because she won't have time, she will hire someone to cook for them; then she will buy a car, and will do her duty imparting justice and taking care of the community.

"Everything is achieved by behaving in the best way, if one wants to fulfill a dream, one achieves it", Marlen said confidently.

Marlen has everything to succeed in life, except financially. Without a job that pays her an adequate salary, her father cannot help her achieve her dreams and Marlen is destined for the same future as most of women in her village: an early marriage, children and housewife life before she is fully grown-up, all in an environment of poverty, meaning extreme poverty.

Our project in Santa Cruz will benefit Marlen. The agricultural cooperative Will increase the community's incomes. A scholarship program for gifted and talented students like Marlen will allow them to go further with their dreams.

Nearly 100 Years in Poverty

SHE Will Never Know A Life of Dignity

—

by Shrita Pathak

Kay Valle is a For Better Community correspondent from Honduras. She is a writer, poet, and former school teacher. She recently went to a poverty-stricken region Honduras called Santa Cruz to interview a child for the "Voice of a Child" section within our monthly magazine. What Kay saw in Santa Cruz shocked her and opened her eyes to the economic disparity in her home country. The following article is based on an interview that was conducted with her in June 2020.

48.3%

of the total population in Honduras lives in poverty

16.5%

of people in Honduras live below US$ 1.90 per day (2018)

52.1

Gini Index of Honduras makes it one of the most unequal countries in Central America

US $370

Honduras' living wage per month for a family

Kay and her husband decided to visit a town called Santa Cruz on June 7, 2020. The town, with a poverty rate some 74 percent, was two hours away from their place of residence. Kay had come to know about the town after a brief search over the Internet. She needed to find a child from a poverty-stricken area of Honduras and get an insight into their way of life and perspective on the world for the next issue of our magazine.

The first thing Kay noticed about the town was the lack of a signboard that greeted visitors to the town. However, the couple managed to find their way and soon found themselves staring at a dingy-looking

building that was located beside sewage. They entered, hoping somebody would help them figure out how to proceed. Kay had, after all, spoken to a representative on a Facebook group for Santa Cruz to help her out. She didn't want to simply barge into the lives of these people. Further, having someone on the inside would definitely help the townspeople feel at ease, she'd thought when she contacted the Facebook group.

Upon entering the building, the couple was rather surprised to discover that the dilapidated structure was intended to serve as a makeshift facility where patients of Coronavirus were to be treated. Due to the wide disparity between the rich and the poor in Honduras, the former can afford to be treated in clean and modern hospitals with state-of-the-art technology. The poor, however? They must simply nod their heads, accept their fate, and be treated in a facility that seemed more like a breeding ground for disease than it did a place to cure the human body of maladies.

Finally, our correspondent met up with the contact person from the Facebook group and was guided into the town to meet with some of the residents. Soon after the interview with the child (a starry-eyed 11-year-old named Marlen), Kay found herself being observed by a skinny old lady who was sweeping outside what was probably her residence. She decided to go and talk to her.

This old lady - with her broken slippers through which long cracked nails were peeping out - was a 90-years-old named Ciriaca Medina. Her husband, a former farmer, was 92. The two, who had far surpassed the average life expectancy in Honduras, currently live in a room without flooring or a mattress on their wooden bed. Their son, Oscar, 48, is a farmer of corn and beans and lives in the same room as his parents.

The three were warm and pleasant. Oscar invited Kay and her husband into their living quarters. The room was dark and Kay had to use the light from her phone to simply see where she was going. It was perhaps at that moment that something within her moved.

They will never see what it means to live a life of dignity - to live a life that is not submerged in poverty. This couple has spent nearly a hundred years not knowing what it means to lead a good life. Ciriaca will never know anything better - ever.

It broke her heart to imagine this old lady, with her now-defunct hearing, taking a bath in a bathroom with no flooring. It broke her heart to hear the old lady tell her she felt cold all the time. It broke her heart to see the lady's long toenails. It took her back to the time she used to cut her own mother's nails some twenty years ago. She was the kind of daughter who made her mother feel...not alone. What about Ciriaca - who was there to cut her nails? Who was there to take care of her? Had she known even one day in her life where she could just breathe easy?

Days went by and time passed. It always does.

Kay went back to the town on June 18. This time with a pair of shiny new sneakers in hand. Ciriaca, upon seeing the gift, was ecstatic and accepted it gratefully. Her husband lurked around, smiling. Kay wondered what her husband would be feeling though. The culture in Honduras is such that the men in the country believe themselves to be the providers. They are the ones who are supposed to cater to the needs of their spouse and children.

But it wasn't he who had failed his family. It was the system that had failed him. And millions of other Hondurans. A system that didn't pay fair wages to its workers. A system where middlemen make huge profits by simply buying goods from Santa Cruz and selling them in bigger cities. A system where public schools don't help create an impact. A system that offers no incentives to fight oppression.

Though Kay has lived in Honduras her whole life, she comes from a Honduras very different from the one Oscar and Ciriaca inhabit. It was this experience that deeply moved her. The disparity she had observed from a distance - the one she had read about in the paper and seen on the road but chosen to not actively engage with - was the one she now knew to be the harsh and gritty world of very real people. Kay is an idealist and believes in a better tomorrow. She is now, more than ever, committed to the cause of making a change. Creating an impact. Making the world a better place. Because if we don't do it, who will?