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Guatemala: Biofuel Production Should Not Threaten Development Among its People

In his acceptance speech for his 1970 Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Norman Borlaug said: "The first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind. Food is the moral right of all who are born into this world." Ethanol production increased from 1,000 million gallons in 1997 to 5,500 million gallons in 2006 in the United States. Biodiesel production increased from 9 million gallons in 2001 to 91 million gallons in 2005. These are Department of Energy figures. Production continues to increase. World Energy Council statistics indicate that international ethanol production was 45.9 hm³ in 2006, and biodiesel production increased from 2,016 thousand tons in 2004 to 7,495 thousand tons in 2006. Despite the positive effects this industry has had on agriculture in the developed world, food security is being jeopardized by it in some areas of the world. Parts of Latin America are at risk. Guatemala could be negatively affected by this industry, especially the people who are most at risk. Food security and poverty reduction should be priorities in Guatemala before biofuel production is introduced to the economy.

Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Central and South America. Income is unequally distributed throughout the country, and the people who live in the rural areas, especially the indigenous people, are the poorest. It can be very hard to believe that people still live in such poverty today. Living in the United States, people rarely see this.

Guatemala is roughly the size of the state of Tennessee. This is perhaps not very large, but it is home to around 12.3 million people. The Census Bureau lists Tennessee's population as just under six million. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), nearly 5.4 million of Guatemala's people are poor or extremely poor, and 74 percent of Guatemalans live below the national poverty line, which is well above the percentage of Americans in the same group.

There are two main groups of people in Guatemala, the indigenous people and the Ladinos. The indigenous people make up most of the extremely poor population, and the Ladinos consider themselves to be a higher class of people. Most Ladinos speak Spanish and receive a better education than the indigenous people do. Because many indigenous people are unable to speak Spanish, they are at a disadvantage for marketing their crops. This also prevents many indigenous people from getting jobs. If employers find that someone cannot speak Spanish or is of indigenous descent, they may discriminate against them. Another factor preventing farmers from selling cash crops is the difficulty in accessing roads. They don't have a road system that is any way similar to that of the United States, so in some rural areas it may be up to 50 miles before they can get to an actual road that leads to improve their farming techniques and to sell at market.

Guatemala has a very rugged terrain which makes transportation and farming increasingly difficult. Mountains in the rural areas have kept the indigenous people isolated for many years. They have been discriminated against severely in the past and are not entirely accepted in society, politically, economically, or culturally.

A low level of education is one of the country's biggest problems. Out of twelve million people, two million children do not attend a school. Three in ten children graduate from sixth grade, and one in twenty enter high school. Many indigenous people cannot communicate with people in surrounding markets and communities to provide an income for their family. Because the indigenous people are

discriminated against, inability to speak Spanish confines job opportunities. Illiteracy plays a very large part in poverty. Nearly 40 percent of Guatemala's population is illiterate. The indigenous people make up most of this number. Because many of the indigenous people live in rural areas, they are secluded from people, technology, and new ideas. Illiteracy would obviously make it more difficult to get a job and would also make it difficult for them to sell at a market.

Agriculture is the most widely pursued occupation, mainly due to the fact that it is the only way to survive. Unfortunately, subsistence farming is still a major lifestyle among many Guatemalans, especially among the indigenous. Those who do grow cash crops have a difficult time selling them. The average farm size of indigenous people is about 1.3 acres. Most of the land is controlled by very few of the larger farmers. The indigenous people can't compete in these crop markets because they don't have the land or resources to do it. Most of their land has been taken away since European settlement, and this worsened in recent civil wars that lasted over three decades. Land distribution is very unequal in this small country, and rural areas feel the harsh effects.

The average family size in Guatemala is around 5.3 people, and that family usually makes around \$1900 per year. Most of these families live on less than \$2 a day. IFAD reports that although forty-three percent of Guatemala's population is comprised of indigenous people, they make less than a quarter of the country's total income.

Malnutrition rates are extremely high, especially among the indigenous people. Many families live off of the maize that they grow. In some families, maize makes up 70 to 80 percent of their diet. The second largest crop in their diets is sugar. Malnutrition also contributes to Guatemala's extremely high infant mortality rate which is close to 40 per 1000, according to USAID.

Because Guatemala's indigenous people are largely isolated by geographical and societal factors, major policy and infrastructure changes are needed to help these people. These include transportation and road improvement, improved education, better credit access, and land rights policies. Cooperative efforts between the Guatemalan government and international agencies are logical.

An important change is improvements in the road system. International groups can't build the roads without the government's permission and participation. Such construction will succeed best if it is well planned and done in stages as part of a national system. It should be a part of a long-term development plan that involves a number of aid groups and governments. These roads will help decrease the isolation of indigenous people and provide better economic opportunities for them.

Education is another major factor. The indigenous people need a better understanding of some things. This does not mean that what they do is wrong, but some things are hurting them. In teaching these people new ways to make a living, certain aspects need to be taken into account. These programs need to respect their culture and their rights. Making them live a particular way is not the right thing to do. For example; programs cannot tell them that they have to learn Spanish. Instead, programs need to respect existing cultures and their languages. They can emphasize the advantages of learning Spanish as a second language. This way, they could communicate at a market and be able to make business transactions without being discriminated against and still have their own culture at home and in their community. Improved literacy rates should help the poor secure loans and learn to use better agricultural methods.

In Guatemala, the number of illiterate women is significantly higher than the number of illiterate men. Gender inequality is another issue. Illiteracy makes this worse. Also, the inability to speak Spanish is higher among women than it is among men, and this makes it more difficult for them to find jobs away from their farms. Employers are hesitant to hire and train people who do not speak their language.

Programs must include policies that work to improve gender equality. It is okay for women to work, and some need to for their families. Again, the programs providing this information need to be respectful towards the people's culture and their rights

Many women and children fall into the extremely poor category in Guatemala. This is due to the three decades of war in previous years that took their husbands and fathers. According to an IFAD report, these wars left 100,000 widows and 250,000 orphans. Because women are not normally seen as providers, they don't usually have jobs outside of the home, so it is up to them to grow and provide food, make clothing, maintain shelter, and care for their families, without a source of income. Land deprivation was also an outcome of the many years of conflict. IFAD's Rural Poverty Portal reported that 40 percent of rural people do not own any land and that half of the agricultural land is owned by 2.5 percent of the country's farmers. The war also contributed to keeping the indigenous people isolated in the first place, which has been one of the biggest factors of their extreme poverty.

Until Guatemala decreases its extreme poverty, biofuels are not a main concern. Biofuel crops could be grown among the wealthier farmers. This might leave a food production gap that could be filled by poorer farmers. If they started to grow a greater variety of crops and raise livestock, it would open up markets for the poor farmers in rural areas. So, if programs not only came in and helped the extremely poor, but taught the other farmers about increasing diversity in their crops, poverty rates might decrease. Also if they increased the diversity of their crops, it would increase the number of available jobs. Specialty crops in general would be more profitable than large fields of maize or beans. On a small scale, some such programs are currently in operation in Guatemala. One example is OPCION, which is supported by Oxfam. OPCION helps farmers grow a wider variety of crops such as mini vegetables and then buys them, packs them, and transports them to the United States. It is a version of Fair Trade that does the same for coffee growers.

The rural poor need greater access to credit. "Micro" loans can be used to boost women's confidence and self-respect. Muhammad Yunus, the recent Nobel Peace Prize winner and a former World Food Prize recipient, organized such a program. It is called the Grameen Bank. Yunus told USA TODAY that 99 percent of the bank's micro loans are repaid. He added:

We have now an environment where 100% of the children of Grameen borrowers are in school—not only they're in school, they're graduating...going to college. Many are becoming professionals, doctors, engineers. The sons and daughters of (illiterate) borrowers. ...So you're creating a dramatically different generation.

If they're given the chance, it has been shown that women who provide for their families have a smaller number of children, increase their children's education, and improve their family's lifestyle.

After years of civil conflict ended just over ten years ago, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Guatemalan government began working on a plan to decrease rural poverty in Guatemala. Some of the overall plans focus on creating fair and equal opportunities for women. In trying to help the indigenous people reduce poverty in their lives, any program needs to involve them in the process. Studies by IFAD show that in order for the indigenous people to buy into the programs, they must be involved. These programs also have to provide training and support for the indigenous people.

Guatemala needs help to get started. Guatemala will not be the only country that is tempted to jump into biofuel production in the near future because of its economic possibilities. Because Guatemala's indigenous people are largely subsistence farmers, ethanol production in other parts of the country should not affect their current food supply level. However, the money that would fund biodiesel production probably would not reach the rural indigenous development programs. In the past, the indigenous people have basically been ignored by their government and their fellow countrymen. Development programs need to include the indigenous people in transportation and road construction,

educational systems, healthcare services, and agricultural and other economic programs. Women should be a focus of development programs. They should be allowed the same opportunities as the men of Guatemala. Continued cooperation between the Guatemalan government and such groups as IFAD should include long term plans for national development that improve the lives of all Guatemalans, especially the very poor, and develop the national economy.

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