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El Salvador

Central America's smallest country is the Republic of El Salvador or El Salvador as it is commonly referred to. It is nestled between the countries of Guatemala and Honduras. Because of this it is the only Central American country that does not have a coastline on the Caribbean Sea. El Salvador does have a coastline on its West side to the Pacific Ocean. El Salvador like the Rest of Central America was once colonized by the Spanish Empire. Like the other areas under Spanish domination it was ruled by Spanish authority and developed a government ruled by 14 distinct families. These families would retain control until a Civil war in the 1980's formally made the country a republic. These families are much larger now, and they do not hold as much power, but the wealthy minority still largely controls El Salvador. It is slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts. However, it is not as productive as the states in our country. It is beset by numerous struggles such as pollution, poverty, malnutrition, political unrest, and corporate interference. These are all problems that plague El Salvador but like many problems there are intertwined and the solution to one problem could possibly unlock the solution to some of the other problems afflicting the nation. The plight of the subsistence farmer who barely is able to feed themselves and their family is a problem that could be beneficial to many. If the subsistence farmers could have access to quality land, capitol, water, and an effective transportation system such as adequate roads to take excess produce to a market.

A typical subsistence farmer in El Salvador lives and farms on small pieces of land that are void of the amenities commonly found in other areas of the world. The land that they have access to is polluted and degraded because of past agricultural use, meaning that to get a successful harvest the farmers need to add fertilizer. Access to clean water is. In many instances the only water available must be obtained from polluted rivers. The water is carried daily by the communities to cement cisterns for use by the communities. The water in the cistern is used for washing but must be boiled or processed in some way before it is safe to drink since it is polluted. This makes the process of meeting daily needs very time consuming, which is why although El Salvador offers education up to the high school level many of the poor family's children must help with the farming activities, such as hauling water. The subsistence farmers typical plant crops such as common bean and maize. Any surplus of the crop may be taken to a local market place but this requires that the farmer make the journey to the market place which takes up all day with no guarantee of success. Part of this is due to the state of roads in the areas where subsistence farmers typically have access to land. The volcanic, mountain geographical makeup of El Salvador also makes any journey difficult.

Some things that could help the subsistence farmers achieve an increase in their standard of living would be to increase the availability of farmable land that does not require extensive effort, an increase in availability of funds for farmers to be able to invest in their crop, and making it easier for the farmers to have access to markets. Better land could be made available through making improvements such as providing accessibility to water and environmental efforts to decrease pollution. If the average farmer were able to have access to more capital then they could invest in their crops by purchasing more crops and necessary fertilizer. If brought to markets, the increased product could decrease the need for imports of food from neighboring countries. In a country where over 50 percent of the population is working to produce subsistence crops, an increase overall would have a profound effect.

In El Salvador 44.1 percent of the land is used for agriculture (Encarta 4). This is the highest proportion in Latin America. Despite this fact, it still needs to import crops due to the large and dense population inhabiting El Salvador. Pollution and environmental degradation play a large role in hindering

subsistence farmers. Some estimates put that out of El Salvador's 7.2 million inhabitants ("Background" 1), only 59 percent have access to clean drinking water (Encyclopedia 2). The best land in the country though is controlled by the small minority who also control the wealth of the country. Some estimates state that 1 percent of El Salvador's population control 40 percent of the arable land (Encarta 4). This Wealthy upper class is the remnants of the original 14 families of El Salvador who completely controlled the country from the colonial period under Spain to the 1980s civil war. The Wealthy use their land to produce such crops as sugar and coffee. El Salvador's history is known for producing indigo at first when the Spanish came but eventually they discovered that coffee grew best in the area and it became El Salvador's biggest export. Back in 1880, coffee was virtually the only crop that was exported ("El Salvador" 1). Due to the wealthy controlling the best land and then using their land for export commodities, only the worst land is available to the subsistence farmers. This worse land requires the most attention though when it comes to producing crops, since the subsistence farmer needs capitol for fertilizer to grow crops. This means that any money that they might make from selling any excess crops goes directly back into producing the next year's crop.

The situation of pollution in El Salvador is a severe one. Studies of the Lempa River indicate this. The river is the country's main portable water source, and it is like much of El Salvador polluted. Specifically it is polluted with dangerously high levels of heavy metals such as Mercury. The high levels of pollution and land degradation El Salvador makes growing crops in the worst areas difficult to do, and of course, the poor are the ones who have to try to work with the worst land.

The trends of pollution are generally staying the same because the politics of El Salvador generally have not. Although the guerilla groups and the 14 family ruling authority signed peace accords after the civil war in the 1980s and El Salvador became a Republic, the wealthy corporations and 14 families still hold the most power within the government. The wealthy minority generally associates itself with the Nationalist Republican Alliance Party or ARENA as it is commonly referred to. This party has had very good relations with the United States. They have even done joint military operations with the United States. From 2003 to 2008 El Salvador even sent troops to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The relationship has led to such actions as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). The party has thus been supported by the United States; in fact the 2009 presidential election was the first in which the United States did not endorse an ARENA candidate. Of course, by endorse the United States means that if their preferred candidate does not get elected then the United States might make remittances from Salvadorians working in the United States harder to send back to El Salvador. This would have a huge impact on the economy of El Salvador. Part of this could be of the fear of the opposition party the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) which was formed from the various guerilla groups after the peace accords. The United States has thus seen them as being friendly to socialism and communism and thought that they might be friendly to Castro's Cuba and Chavez's Venezuela. Although the Cold War is supposedly over, it wasn't that long ago and there are still tensions. The 2009 election was the first time that an ARENA candidate did not win the presidency and went to the FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes. This could be an indication that the country might crack down on international corporations and the wealthy minority to help the majority poor.

If subsistence farmers could produce enough produce to feed the country then El Salvador would not need to import as much food as it does now from neighboring countries. An increase in availability of foods might also slow the amount of Salvadorians immigrate to the United States. Because of the high population and relative poverty of the country, many head to the United States to get work. These immigrants work and then send the money that they make back to their families in El Salvador. This money is referred to as remittances. It is suspected that 22.3 percent of families in El Salvador receive remittances from relatives in the United States.(Background 5) The Central bank estimated that in 2008 remittances sent to El Salvador totaled around 3.8 billion dollars.(Background 5) As already mentioned the United States is an important presence in El Salvador both politically and economically. This is part

of why El Salvador officially changed its currency to the United States' dollar in 2001. Typically it is El Salvador's best and brightest who make the journey to the United States. If these immigrants could stay in their country perhaps they could work on fixing their own country's problems. The first step to achieve this though is to find a way so that they can survive in their country. This requires abundance of food and a means to sustain an income or living.

Based upon my research I would say that subsistence farmers need to be able to have access to land and capital to produce crops. This would be hard to do since the land in El Salvador is so polluted and the best land is already been taken over by the rich and corporations, therefore the best that can be done is to provide access to capital, and make improvements to the land easier. This includes an effective transportation system and running water. Most roads are terrible which makes transportation difficult both to get supplies such as fertilizer and then to sell excess crop at nearby markets. If there was a water source readily available, whether it is a well or running water, then the youth would not need to trek to a river and spend hours daily collecting water from a possibly polluted source. They could then spend the time in school getting an education so that they can improve themselves and be even better equipped to solve the problems that they will encounter in the future. Since most of the subsistence farmers live in rural areas their children need to walk a great distance to attend school. An improved road system would help the subsistence farmers get to market and also help the students who live in rural travel to a school.

The United States has given much aid to El Salvador in the past and is likely to continue doing that into the future. In the 1980s El Salvador received around 5 billion dollars in foreign aid; this was mostly from the United States (Encarta 3). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has done many projects to aid the farmers of El Salvador. These projects have included teaching new techniques to farmers so that they can improve their crops. Those whom the USAID has worked with have benefitted from the programs. However, USAID has typically tried to work with new farmers. Their reasoning is that they have found that the new younger farmers are more willing to change and try new things. USAID has observed that older farmers who have farmed for years typically have their own system worked out and do not want to risk what little stability they have in a process that they are not certain will work, despite USAID good intentions. They also work mostly with farmers who have over an acre of land, access to credit, or who do not have sufficient access to water or roads. This leaves a large portion of the subsistence farmers unqualified to receive assistance since they do not have an acre of farmable land, access to credit, or do not have sufficient access to water sources or transportation systems such as roads.

The international community, and many individuals and groups in particular such as USAID, are trying to help the subsistence farmers of El Salvador. They are doing this by providing information about new techniques and suitable crops to plant are helpful but more must be done. The international community needs to encourage El Salvador to help itself by making its people available to be helped by USAID and other such organizations. This requires that the local government take steps to improve roads and water accessibility for all the citizens of El Salvador, not just the wealthy minority. Another entity, such as a banking organization could help in the implementation of mini loans to provide start up capital for the subsistence farmers that need it. It needs to be an international community effort to accomplish this and each group has a part that they will need to do. However, since the colonial rule of the 14 families and the then through the 1980s civil war improvements have been made. Recent reforms in El Salvador have addressed such issues as price controls, reducing monopolies, and increasing free trade. The post civil war government has also had more of an interest in expanding the country's roads, and other government run facilities. More work needs to be done, but if the international community supports El Salvador then it is more likely that it will be successful.

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