

Shantal Hernandez  
 Ankeny Centennial High School  
 Ankeny, Iowa  
 Equatorial Guinea, Factor 17: Good Governance

### **Equatorial Guinea: A Country's Potential vs. A Corrupt Government**

“Unidad, Paz, Justicia”. Unity, Peace and Justice are the three words in Equatorial Guinea’s flag. However, it is questionable whether these principles have been upheld since President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo took office 37 years ago (1979). He is the leader to a population of 820,346 people, with the majority living in poverty. His government is known to have avoided reports of human rights abuses and torture of his political opponents (“Fang”). The ruling party in Equatorial Guinea is “Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial; PDGE”<sup>1</sup>. A party that, despite calling itself a democracy, does not let its citizens have a say in their government’s decisions while constantly denying basic international human rights of: education in rural places, freedom of speech, fair income compensation and distribution and access to proper nutrition.

Despite having the greatest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in Africa due to its vast oil producing activities, most Equato Guinean families live a rural life based on subsistence farming (“World Report 2014”). According to the African Business Magazine, the country imports approximately 70% of its food. Currently, agriculture, forestry and fishing account for only 1.2% of GDP. The magazine also stated that “Current fish production stands at 4,000 tonnes a year but the government argues that 75,000 tonnes a year would be sustainable” (“Equatorial Guinea: Agriculture” ). Most of the population lives in penury; moreover “over three quarters of the population earn less than one dollar per day” (Bohne). Naturally, this becomes a hardship for Equato Guineans because they have a fertility rate of 4.57, ranking them 24th worldwide for highest fertility rate (“The World Factbook”). The high fertility rate is considered a hardship because larger families are harder to provide for, and thus often live in poverty.

The rate of large families might be related to the fact that polygamy still dominates this country’s rural life. Though they do control the production of food, this system leaves women with limited power. Some of the other responsibilities wives hold are childcare and all of the household chores. This system allows the husband to have his own building, and the wives take turns spending time with him there (“Republic of Equatorial Guinea”). The fact that polygamy often leads to large families could have something to do with the fact that “43% of children under the age of five are not developing properly, 16% are underweight... and 13% of infants are born with a low birth weight (“Nutrition at a Glance”).

As a result of all of this, Equatorial Guinea has extremely high rates of malnutrition in comparison to other countries and the gap with its GDP. Examples of the countries with lower GDP and lower malnutrition rates are Congo, Turkey, Cameroon and others (“Nutrition at a Glance”). Another gap appears when one compares the GDP, with the country’s Human Development Index and the amount of profit the citizens actually get from their GDP revenue. The country has a per-capita gross domestic product of US\$32,026. This places Equatorial Guinea in the highest rank of GDP in Africa, yet it ranks 136 out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index. (“World Report 2014”). However, Equatorial Guinea’s current poverty headcount ratio is found at 76.8% (“Equatorial Guinea.”). More than half of Equato Guineans live in rural areas, where less revenue is made. The country previously was a large exporter of cocoa and coffee (60,000 tons of cocoa in 1969), but because of domestic political problems and falling world market prices, production and exports ceased (“Equatorial Guinea: Agriculture”). This raises the question: if the country has the highest GDP in the continent, where is all the profit going?

---

<sup>1</sup> Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea. Translation from Britannica Encyclopedia.

Several sources, including the World Report, agree that Equatorial Guinea's president is responsible for most of the mismanagement of public funds, persistent high-levels of corruption, and serious abuses, including secret detention and unfair trials. An example of this situation is Roberto Bernardi, an Italian businessman, released from a prison in Bata, Equatorial Guinea. Here, he was tortured, starved, detained for lengthy periods in solitary imprisonment in miserable conditions, and repeatedly denied medical treatment and access to his lawyer or diplomatic representatives ("Equatorial Guinea: Halt"). This is just one example of the high levels of corruption and fraudulence the government powers are responsible for. One might wonder what the reasons are as to why these inhumane measures took place. The answer lies in a denied right to freedom of speech. As reported by José María Irujo, Obiang's son used the money of a construction company called 'Eloba' to buy a pair of Michael Jackson's gloves with 1.8 thousand dollars of the inversions from this company. According to the Human Rights Watch, Bernardi was "unjustly imprisoned for over 18 months in an apparent attempt to protect Obiang's eldest son, Teodoro -commonly known as "*Teodorín*"- Nguema Obiang Mangué, the country's second vice president for defense and security, from disclosures about his alleged corruption" ("Equatorial Guinea: Halt"). In an attempt to prevent the president's son from spending the money his country was making on a luxury for himself, Bernardi was punished and sent to prison. These actions, besides being immoral, are illegal; as the 5th Article from Equatorial Guinea's constitution states: "El respeto a la persona humana, a su dignidad y libertad y demás derechos fundamentales"<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, neither his dignity nor his liberty human rights were respected.

This is not the only occasion where Teodorín has misused his country's finances. The Foreign Policy Magazine stated that, being the minister of agriculture and forestry in his country, Teodorín has taken advantage of his power to enhance his salary of \$5,000 per month and added a timber tax to international logging firms (Silverstein). This evidence provides a clearer image to where the country's revenue is going while most of its citizens continue to live in poverty, and yet, the president hasn't done anything to prevent this.

However, the government authority is not just affecting the revenue for the country. Research has shown that there have been cases in which even the schools in Equatorial Guinea are being affected by the government in the field of political party views. Government interference continues to impact the hiring of teachers based on their political views. For example, pressure on unqualified teachers with political connections to give passing grades to failing students with political connections has been happening as well. And yet, there are no teacher's unions to defend the rights of teachers as most teaching opportunities are only available to PDGE supporters (Country Reports on Human Rights). The lack of teacher protection unions, results in not only poor quality of education for Equato Guineans, but denied human rights in freedom of speech and thought for teachers as well. All of these human right abuses are not prosecuted in any way because the country has no legally registered independent human rights groups. The few local activists who seek to address and protect human rights related issues face intimidation, harassment, and reprisals ("World Report 2014"). If anyone is fired or denied a job due to their political beliefs, trends in malnutrition will also increase considering the lack of income to buy proper food.

One way Equatorial Guinea could grow as a country and benefit from its GDP revenue would be starting micro-entrepreneurships in the fields of agriculture and aquaculture within the local society. According to the African Business Magazine, the dependency Equatorial Guinea has on importation of its food<sup>3</sup> could increase as a result of the promotion of export crops, such as cocoa and coffee, over subsistence farming ("Equatorial Guinea: Agriculture"). There have been several projects that have been advocated in Equatorial Guinea such as the international "Montrose" project. This project has been implemented to support and grow base-level entrepreneurship in Equatorial Guinea. It is expected to "focus on value

<sup>2</sup> The respect to a human person, his dignity and freedom and more fundamental rights. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> Dependency of 70% as mentioned in introduction paragraph

chain development in targeted subsectors including pineapples and aquaculture, provision of training and technical assistance for the cocoa sector, and business development support for new base-level entrepreneurs” (“Supporting Entrepreneurship”).

Equatorial Guinea is in need of non-governmental organizations such as these to intervene in the country’s development because if the government does not, this will be the only way for Equatorial Guineans to be trained in activities such as aquaculture that could provide better income for their families. One can assume that benefits will come if Equatorial Guineans begin small businesses based on aquaculture due to its vast maritime exposure within the 644 km of coastline (“Projects”). In addition to this, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee organization could also be a resource that would help fund training for micro-entrepreneurs in Equatorial Guinea. The NGO has been successful in countries like Tanzania where it helped “facilitate agribusiness investment in the poultry and maize value chains” (“BRAC Tanzania”). This solution would not only give back the citizens the revenue earned from the GDP its country gains, but also give each person the opportunity to grow and have a bigger salary than a dollar per day, while simultaneously reducing the levels of poverty.

Education is power. The more educated people are, the harder it will be for a government to control a country. Equatorial Guinea’s current literacy rate is of 95.55% in accordance to the UNICEF, yet this does not mean that Equatorial Guineans are educated (“Statistics”). According to the Global Academic Evaluators, preschools in Equatorial Guinea teach children ages 3-6 but may not be accessible to rural children (“Education Systems in Africa”). Likewise, evidence from UNICEF proves that while the average rate (male and female) in Primary school participation is of 60.45%, the average rate (male and female) in Secondary school participation is 22.05% (“Statistics”). In comparison with South Africa, Equatorial Guinea’s investment on education from GDP revenue is very low. As a matter of fact, South Africa spends 5% of its GDP on education (“A Huge Investment”), whereas Equatorial Guinea’s expenditure is of .9%, which also includes spending on public administration, education, health and social work, community, social and personal services (Bizimana, Gallardo, and Pla). Consequently, there is a need for education to become a priority in order to give this country its best chance. It is not possible for a country to speak its mind out about its government’s areas of improvement, when human rights are being threatened. But how will people ever be able to defend their human rights, if they aren’t even aware that they exist? When a country lives in fear of what their ruling power might do to them and their families if they defend their beliefs, there aren’t many options as to how local projects would help improve the situation. Nevertheless, there are several things that external organizations such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee could do to improve the situation in this country.

If the country followed the example of the 2011 WISE Prize Laureate, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, and became one of the countries that his organization has helped in educating disadvantaged rural communities, Equatorial Guinea’s 24th article in its constitution would actually be advocated. This article states that every citizen has the right to a primary education (“La Ley Fundamental Reformada”). The proposal includes having the organization sponsor training for a resource that can provide education for children without any cost. More specifically, this resource could be one of the wives in the large families. Instead of spending all day doing household chores, capable women could get trained on how to teach the future generations to create a better government. It is very likely that the guidance of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee --a non-governmental organization founded by Sir Fazle Hasan-- would be successful because it affirms that throughout its history of thirty years, the organization has provided basic education to around 10 million students in Bangladesh, with more than five million graduates from non-formal primary schools (BRAC Education Programme). One must keep in mind that this is not a change that will happen overnight; however, if the process is persistent, a change in political views and enactment of basic human rights is likely to take place. If progress is made and future generations become educated in a more professional depth, more political parties might be created. This is likely to be successful even with the current corrupt government because the right of education is one of the

international human rights from the United Nations. Since Equatorial Guinea is one of the countries in this allegiance, the president would have no choice but to agree to the organization's methods to improve education. This would then lead to a change in revenue management that would benefit the country as a whole in economic income. This increase of financial support would then reduce the amount of subsistence farming currently taking place in the country and increase the levels of awareness in proper nutrition. But most importantly, a change in political views would provide Equatorial Guinea citizens with the opportunity to defend their opinions and protect their human rights.

Even though it is fair to say that Equatorial Guinea is one of the African countries with most potential to be prosperous, its corrupt government has led it in the opposite direction. Despite having high rates of literacy, its population is not properly educated, which prevents Equato Guineans from being able to defend the rights they are not aware they have. Poverty, malnutrition, and lack of respect for its citizens' dignity are all major issues currently taking place in this democracy; not to mention the gap between the country's GDP per capita and the revenue citizens actually get from it. However, there is still hope for a brighter future, which will be brought by opportunities of training in education and sponsoring of micro-entrepreneurships while simultaneously empowering women. Equato Guineans, like everyone else in this world, should be able to have a say in the methods their government treats its population and manages the profits the country accomplishes to make. Unity, Peace and Justice, let us make the printed words on its flag, true to this country.

### Works Cited

- "A Huge Investment in Education." SouthAfrica.info. SouthAfrica.info, n.d. Web.
- Bizimana, Gérard, Glenda Gallardo, and Lauréline Pla. *Equatorial Guinea*. Malabo: UNICEF
- Bohne, Julian. "African Dictator's Son Gets Mega-yacht Designed in Germany | Environment | DW.COM | 28.02.2011." *DW.COM*. 2016 Deutsche Welle, 28 Feb. 2011. Web.
- "BRAC Education Programe." *Education.brac.net*. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, 2012. Web.
- "BRAC Tanzania." *Brac.net*. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, n.d. Web.
- Country Reports On Human Rights Practices For 2011, and United States Department Of State • Bureau Of Democracy, Human Rights And La. "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011." *EQUATORIAL GUINEA* (2011): n. pag. *Equatorial Guinea*. United States Department of State • Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2011. Web.
- "Education Systems in Africa Part XVII: Equatorial Guinea." *Aevaluators.com*. Global Academic Evaluators, 2012. Web.
- "Equatorial Guinea: Agriculture." *African Business Magazine*. IC Publications, 19 Feb. 2014. Web..
- "Equatorial Guinea." *Equatorial Guinea*. The World Bank, 2016. Web. 23 Feb. 2016. Mar. 2016.
- "Equatorial Guinea: Halt Prisoner Torture." *Hrw.org*. Human Rights Watch, 30 July 2014. Web.
- "Fang." *Peoples of Central Africa*. New York, NY: Facts on File, 1997. 44-46. Print.
- Harrison-Church, Ronald James. "Log in." *Britannica School*. Iowa AEA Online, n.d. Web.
- Irujo, José María. "El Guante De Michael Jackson, Pista Contra Los Obiang." *EL PAÍS*. Prisa, 1 Feb. 2014. Web.
- "*Ley Fundamental De Guinea Ecuatorial*" Malabo: Equato Guinean Government, 7 Sept. 1982. PDF.
- "Nutrition at a Glance, Equatorial Guinea." *Nutrition at a Glance* (n.d.): 1-2. *WorldBank.org*. The World Bank. Web.
- "PROJECTS." *Guinee-ecuatorial.eu*. Embassy of Equatorial Guinea, 2016. Web.
- "Republic of Equatorial Guinea." *CultureGrams Online Database: Subscriber Area Only*. ProQuest, 2016. Web.
- Silverstein, Ken. "Teodorin's World." *Foreign Policy Teodorins World Comments*. Foreign Policy, 21 Feb. 2011. Web.
- "Statistics: Equatorial Guinea." *UNICEF*. UNICEF, 24 Dec. 2013. Web.

"Supporting Entrepreneurship in Equatorial Guinea." *Montroseint.com*. Montrose International, 2015. Web.

"The World Factbook: Equatorial Guinea." *CIA.gov*. Central Intelligence Agency, 25. Web.

"World Report 2014: Equatorial Guinea." *Human Rights Watch*. World Report 2014, 07 Jan. 2014. Web.