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Colombia, Human Rights

Colombia: Empowering Rural Populations to Cure Human Rights Violations Through Economic Security and Education

With a warm, tropical climate along the coast and a temperate climate inland, Colombia is perfect for crops of all kinds, including flowers and coffee. What is not readily apparent about Colombia is how it is riddled with human rights violations, hunger, disease, malnutrition, and poverty. This country faces problems with split personalities. It is both rural and urban, as shown by the 10% of people in Colombia who receive over 40% of the country's wealth, while poor provinces like Choco are being excluded from the formal economy and government, and are labeled as 'outside' regions (Colombia Reports Data, 2018). Those who occupy these outside regions, or rural areas, are people whose human rights are being violated in more than one way. There are many rights that are recognized under international law that are not being upheld in Colombia and are affecting food security, such as the right to food, education, information, adequate housing, and freedom from the worst forms of child labor (child soldiering and prostitution). These said rights are denied to rural Colombians.

Background

Colombia is the second most populous South American country, and the nation is ranked as the third largest economy in South America. Colombia has a GDP of \$314.5 billion in U.S dollars, which, stretched over its population of 49.68 million, comes to around \$14,400 per capita (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2018). Comparatively, Brazil, which has the highest GDP in South America and 8th highest in the world, has achieved a GDP of \$2.055 trillion, \$15,600 per capita (CIA, 2018). The Colombian economy relies on oil and other energy production and mining industries. These exports often have unsteady prices due to other countries demand and the supply that Colombia can produce. The reliance on these specific, unsteady exports allows for the economy to fluctuate unpredictably. Colombia is the fourth largest coal exporter in the world, along with being the third largest coffee exporter and second largest cut flowers exporter. Colombia currently has 11.2 million acres of arable land, but that land is being used inefficiently, shown by the 65% of land available for agricultural use that is not being farmed (Butler, 2019).

Citizens in rural areas make up 19.55% of the population, while the other 80.4% of Colombia's population is considered urban (World Bank, 2018). Approximately 64% of that rural population lives beneath the poverty line, meaning they live on less than \$88 per month, and 29% of those people are extremely poor and live with even less. Large landholders currently occupy vast amounts of land, 2 million hectares of which were illegally obtained from small, powerless families and indigenous communities. This has been going on for over 15 years without rest (Food Security Portal, 2016). According to the United Nations, Colombia currently has the highest number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), a total of about 6.5 million, which is more than Syria, Iraq, or any other war zone (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015). This can be attributed to the 52-year land conflict along with large landholders pushing people off of the land. Colombia's income inequality is some of the worst in the world, meaning the gap between the rich and extremely poor is incredibly wide. This can lead to higher poverty rates and political unrest.

The government plays a large role in the cleanup of the land conflict that ended in 2016 with the Colombian Peace Accord. Currently, Colombia's government is considered a democracy with a very similar system to that of the United States. There are legislative, executive, and judicial branches with a congress, president, and supreme court. The current sitting president is President Iván Duque Márquez,

who is from the Democratic Centre Party, opposite of his predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos. Duque plans to offer investment incentives to private initiatives focused on increasing the creation of employment in rural areas, making a direct prioritization of small enterprises over the larger, private companies. Along with this, Duque proposed reform to the Peace Accord that was agreed to during the Santos administration. This reform would aid in the elimination of drug dealing as a political-related crime, stripping offenders of amnesty or the ability to be pardoned. Also, the reform targets eliminating illegal crops and protecting land obtained with sincere intention, even if it is part of the Land Fund, which is a fund mentioned in the Peace Accord that is to be used to distribute land to those the conflict-affected (Sánchez, 2018).

Issue

Colombia currently struggles with human rights within its borders. Rural families, in particular women, face conspicuous social inequality. Rural areas have significantly higher poverty rates than urban areas. As a result of the higher and more extreme poverty rates, those who live in rural areas have trouble obtaining and maintaining food security. “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”(The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2006, p. 1). This is a crucial goal for Colombia to have on its radar.

The human right to food and the idea of food security differ in definition and law but are similar in concept. The definition to the right to food is “...an inclusive right. It is not simply a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins, and other specific nutrients. It is a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life, and to the means to access them”(Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2010, p. 2). Food security is not formally recognized under international law, while the human right to food is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, the International Bill of Rights, and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (OHCHR, 2010). The right to food is also recognized in numerous treaties and international conventions. Much like food security, the right to food means that food is available, whether that be from natural resources or fishing and hunting, that a person has physical access or the economic means to buy food, and it is adequate, satisfying dietary needs.

The majority of people who suffer from hunger and malnutrition live in rural areas. Of those who are hungry and malnourished, 50% are small landholders, 20% are rural, landless people, 10% are fishermen, hunters, forest users, and the last 20% live in urban areas (Deutsche Bank Research, 2009). There is a link between people living in rural areas and hunger. Those who live in those areas have a harder time obtaining land, and they lack access to water, seeds, tools, and other things you would use to grow a sufficient amount of food. A lack of access to technology, markets, and information also holds those living in rural areas back (OHCHR, 2010). More than half of the rural population in Colombia are being denied the right to food.

Poverty, hunger, and malnourishment all affect women in greater quantities than men. Women are two times more likely to suffer from malnutrition and girls are twice as likely to die from starvation, malnutrition, or another preventable childhood disease (OHCHR, 2010). Females are being unequally denied the right to food. Women also have a lack of access to social, political, civil, and economic rights, and that lack of access is worse in rural areas where very few people have access to any of those things.

In 1999, women made up 60-80% of unskilled laborers in the flower-cutting industry, a major export for Colombia, but females made up a much lower share of professional jobs (SOFA Team & Doss, 2011). This demonstrates that women are a major part of the Colombian economy and keeping the economy up, but are not gaining jobs in higher standings. Women living in rural areas work an average of 10 hours

more than men a week and devote around 15% of those hours to home care, while rural men only devote around 1% (Tafur, Gumucio, Twyman, Martínez Barón, & Muriel, 2015). Even though they work longer, “Their salaries are sometimes significantly lower than those of men, including for identical or similar tasks or for work of equal value. Many women are also employed in the informal sector, for instance in domestic work and self-employment in precarious conditions” (OHCHR, 2010, p. 14). Women make up more than half of the workforce, they work longer hours, and yet, they are not seen as equal value. These factors lead to females not having economic access to adequate food, thus making them unable to enjoy the right to food.

Child soldiering and prostitution are a common occurrence in Colombia, where most international trafficking can be traced back to. This is especially prevalent among internally displaced persons, areas that the armed conflict-affected, or where an armed criminal group is active (U.S Department of State, 2015). There are also higher reported rates of sex trafficking in areas with tourism, which are more likely than not large cities. To earn more money for the family, children are sent into urban areas to work. Children who work in the informal sector in urban areas are at an increased risk for sex and labor trafficking. These problems directly conflict with Freedom From The Worst Forms of Child Labor. “Children and adolescents suffering from hunger and malnutrition are often more vulnerable to being recruited into the worst forms of child labour to survive (e.g., child soldiers, child prostitution). Realizing their right to food is crucial to prevent this from happening” (OHCHR, 2010, p. 6).

The right to information and education are lacking as well. Hunger and malnutrition affect the learning capabilities of students and may cause them to drop out and seek work instead (OHCHR, 2010). Currently, in rural areas, the school enrollment levels are around 26%, and a large contributing factor to this low enrolment is the current education structure not being able to handle a full enrollment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2016). Children are being denied their right to education and information, which, if provided, could allow them to lead a better life where they can get higher paying jobs and aid in the defeat of hunger and poverty. Knowledge is power, and in areas where power is severely lacking, power is necessary for progress to be made.

Proposed Solutions

No single solution can mend all of these issues. Instead, a multi-pronged approach would target these issues from different angles to fix the main problem and the symptoms of it. First, we must find a way for IDP, women, and the rural poor to receive land, live, and work it while making a profit from the crops. Then, an education reform that would increase a school’s capacity along with keeping the children in school. This would provide the needed skills a person needs to be successful in life. Finally, the empowerment of women in rural areas through education would increase food production, decrease poverty and hunger, as well as set an example for the younger generations.

Nonprofit, Nongovernmental Land Holding Organization

The first proposed solution to specifically target the problems listed above would be a nonprofit organization geared towards the purchase of land to be distributed to those in need of land. This organization would hire displaced people to work the land as well as live on it and receive a share of the profits from the products of the land. An application must be filled out, asking for easy information like sex, ethnicity, status (IDP or not), income, education, skill sets, and family size. Priority will be given to internally displaced women in order to improve the rate of female heads of households and female landowners as well as decrease IDP populations.

This nonprofit organization would provide a way for women and children to be safe from trafficking and child soldiering because the organization would provide much needed economic stability and security. Refugee or IDP camps are very rare in the country and in neighboring countries, and over six million displaced people put themselves at greater risk for trafficking and child soldiering by relocating to urban

areas (Vargas & Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2017). Essentially, this organization substitutes for a refugee and IDP camp, allowing for rural Colombians to stay in rural areas and not feel it necessary to search for income or housing. These internally displaced persons have nowhere else to turn, so they end up putting themselves in more danger, just to stay alive. Giving access to healthcare, education, food, and shelter is the main goal of this nonprofit, as well as reducing the number of IDP and increasing the number of educated women and girls.

Funding for this project will be raised domestically and requested from other organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and similar agencies, which support the empowerment of women. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a multi-billion dollar foundation that is focused on eliminating inequity across the globe. Investment in the health and empowerment of women and girls has a ripple effect that helps families, communities, and countries achieve lasting benefits because women have the unique ability to reshape societies (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). This nonprofit would reassure people who think they have no chance or safety, that someone is willing to fight for them.

The Colombian government signed a peace accord with the FARC-EP that included rural reforms and implementation started in 2016. This reform is designed to strengthen the state's prevalence in rural areas and distribute a total of three million hectares of land to those without land in rural areas within 10 years (Moloney, 2016). Whether the Colombian government will uphold this peace agreement and peace will be maintained is unknown. The accord is so new that there is too little progress from which to draw conclusions. Working apart from the government would give this non-profit a way to generate actual results and aid those in poverty and those who have been displaced due to the conflict.

Education Expansion For Women

As mentioned previously, the rural education system cannot handle full enrollment, which needs to be dealt with first before any progress on education can be made. There must be an effort to expand the capacity of schools and hire teachers to teach a larger population of students. Education is the first step in rural communities gaining basic human rights. Improving the educational system in rural Colombia would give children the tools to fight disease and decrease poverty. The next step after expanding the education system is making sure there are students to fill it.

The School in Search of the Child project, sponsored by UNICEF, specifically targets children affected by armed conflict and works to incorporate them back into the school system. In order to do this, they cover all expenses that are needed to keep students in school (The Borgen Project, 2018). Adding to this idea, specifically targeting girls to enroll would increase the number of educated women and encourage change in the dynamic of rural areas. Educating women in agriculture and the management of an agricultural business in rural areas would allow for an increased rate of women who hold professional jobs in agriculture. Agriculture, an important engine of growth and poverty reduction, is underperforming in part because women, who are a needed resource to agriculture and the economy, face constraints that reduce their productivity (SOFA Team & Doss, 2011). Colombia's right to food and food security is heavily dependent on the women in agriculture, so the constraints such as education and wage gaps ought to be addressed.

The Borgen Project, a national campaign dedicated to fighting global poverty, is seeing a change. From 1989 to 2011, the percentage of girls that completed lower secondary school increased from 37% to 94%. This is one of the factors contributing to the increased number of women in the workforce from 1990 to 2012. It grew from 30% to 43% (The Borgen Project, 2018). It is believed that educating women on their capabilities and strengths will empower them to seek just and fair treatment from society and their government (Tafur, Gumucio, Twyman, Martínez Barón, & Muriel, 2015, p. 6). This is a crucial step to the gaining of equal rights for women in Colombia and would set an example for further generations.

Educating young women also leads to a lower infant mortality rate and increases the health of both the mother and child, thus leading to healthier families. In a study that analyzed the connections between female education and the health of a child, looking at the correlation of infant mortality, assessment of health, morbidity rates, and education, it stated that, "...an individual's own schooling is the most important correlate of his or her health, and that parents' schooling, especially mother's schooling, is the most important correlate of child health" (Chou, Liu, Grossman, & Joyce, 2007, p.1). Education also leads to the securing of higher wages along with jobs in safer environments (Porter, 2014). This aids families in being able to economically secure adequate food, therefore increasing the food security they have.

Conclusion

The situation in rural Colombia is not one without hope. There are many things that can be done to lessen poverty and food insecurity in Colombia, and the severity of the challenge requires multiple solutions. A nonprofit organization geared towards offering financial stability to people in rural areas would promote gender equality, reduce the internally displaced population, and diminish the risk of child soldiering and human trafficking. Improving the education system in rural areas expands access to education and provides a way for women to contribute to the economy. These approaches would likely result in reducing poverty rates and increasing food security. This requires the involvement of various nonprofit organizations seeking to improve the lives of those in rural areas, the educational system can be improved to hold more students, encouraging girls to seek education. These will enable women to have an improved ability to buy land and provide food to the country, and the number of internally displaced persons will decrease. Also as a result of women receiving more education, infant mortality and morbidity rates will decrease, infant and overall family health will increase, and household income will increase. This allows for a higher economic access to food that is more adequate, improving the food security for rural Colombians.

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