

Alice Eriksson

Lundellska skolan

Uppsala, Sweden

Guatemala, Conflicts, governance, education, and human rights

Corruption in Guatemala makes 5-year-olds malnourished

Guatemala is one of the Central American republics where 2.5 million of the inhabitants live in poverty and extreme food insecurity. The soils in Guatemala are very fertile and cultivable and in addition, the climate is perfectly suited for growing sugar cane, bananas, coffee, cocoa and more. Farmers in fact produce crops enough to feed their entire population several times, but due to export and down prioritization of their own inhabitants, half of all children under the age of 5 are malnourished, this according to the newspaper "kehity" that is distributed by the finish foreign affair minister. Corruption in the judiciary and an uneven distribution of land mean that the lower class in society get less and less power and money for their work, which reduces the opportunities for a safe and sufficient food supply. Through education, land reform and the eradication of corruption, I believe that malnutrition can be radically reduced.

Description of Guatemala as a country

Guatemala is a country in Latin America that bases most of the country's income on agriculture. According to the source "omvärlden berättar", agriculture accounts for 1/4 of the country's GDP and 2/3 of its export. Between 1954-1985 Guatemala was under military dictatorship, and its history has been characterized by conflicts and revolutions. During the 20th century, several revolutions took place where most self-sufficient farms were wiped out. Consequently today 3% of the population owns total power over about 70% of the arable land ("*omvärlden berättar*", 2015). These private investors control markets together and jointly set low wages to avoid competing, which means that Guatemala is an oligarchy. Most Guatemalans do not own any land after the conflicts during the 20th century. In lack of other occupation, the general population are forced to work on large farms owned by wealthy merchants. On these farms, wages are so low that most workers cannot afford to eat properly.

In 2015, the president Perez Molina was arrested for corruption, which is a massive problem in politics and the judiciary in Guatemala. In short, the modern history of the country has been turbulent in terms of governance, human rights, and leaders.

The Xiquin Quiebac Family

A typical family in Guatemala consists of a mother, father and several children who live in rather primitive conditions, especially as rural residents. In addition, many families lose family members due to suicide among fathers, and diseases linked to malnutrition among children. Therefore, many mothers are single providers for 4-5 children, which is extremely difficult in a country without social security support from the government, health insurance and so on.

In this paper we follow the family Xiquin Quiebac who live in the southern village of "Cerro de Oro" and belong to the indigenous Mayan people. Many people in their village as well as relatives have suffered and suffer from malnutrition. One of them is 14-year-old Adele, she is 130 centimeters tall, which in the Nordic countries represents the height of an eight-year-old. When a reporter from

Finland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviews Adele, she says herself that she gets enough food. Her mother Teresa, who is also present, sadly says, "She's used to too little food. That's why she says that." Adele suffers from chronic malnutrition, which means that she often suffers from stomach problems that do not go away and that at school she has difficulty focusing. The definition of malnutrition also points to the weak immune system that you get. Adele is therefore extra susceptible to infection; she could die of a flu or severe cold since her body is already so weak and therefore unable to cope with a virus as well. Teresa says that she notices that her children are sick but explains that it is difficult to do anything about it since the healthcare system is so costly. Treatment of malnutrition is expensive and means maintaining a stable food intake, which is difficult for the Xiquin Quiebac family. The mum, Teresa also says that care would have been good, but that what they need most is food.

A typical day for a family like Adele's the food intake consists of a very one-sided and nutrient-poor diet. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner at home, they eat mostly tortilla bread made from corn grains filled with beans. At school, Adele is given a glass of incaparina as a meal, which is a kind of gruel based on corn and soybean flour. Most people probably understand that this diet is unsustainable for humans, partly because it lacks the amounts of the important vitamins needed due lack of a varied diet and partly because the amount of food for a general person is far too small. (kyheti-finish foreign affair minister, 2014)

Challenges and problems

Guatemala has many different difficulties at present and challenges for the future. As previously said, there is food insecurity and reasons include the corona pandemic, natural disasters and increased living costs. The biggest problem, however, is the distribution of land and the structure of the economic system, as it favors private ownership. Guatemala is one of the countries with most skewed distribution of wealth in the world. There are significant gaps between different groups in several aspects such as economic and social, as presented by the website "Globalis" (2021). Recently, gender equality has decreased, which is a trend that is expected to continue. On the same track, gay marriage and abortion are banned in the country and are punishable by up to 10 years in prison ("regeringen" 2019 and "tidningen global" 2022). The creation of these laws is a setback in development and a problem because it reduces personal freedom. Furthermore, democracy is on the decline in the country because the judiciary is controlled by a small group of politicians, private investors, and organized criminals. Guatemala is thus suffering from corruption.

According to Guatemala's legislation workers have the right to form and participate in trade unions and thus also have the opportunity to influence their work conditions (regeringen, 2019). However, in fact companies, authorities, police etc. counteract the law by means of threats, violence, and dismissals. They do this to prevent change, revolution, and possible financial loss for the companies.

Further inconvenience exists for the indigenous people who are oppressed. Guatemala has an indigenous population that makes up about 40% of all inhabitants. They consist of several different groups where the Maya is the largest. Among indigenous peoples, forced labor is relatively common where entire families live on a farm where they get food and housing in exchange for work. It is common that they are not paid at all, or that the salary is extremely low, which means that in reality they are almost serfs. This goes on over time because these workers are mostly inherited over generations. In addition, the young girls who work as domestic servants in families are often sexually abused. The information presented was retrieved from "planinternational-plansverige and Globalis (Globalis, 2021)".

Solutions to end the crisis

Altogether, food security is the key, i.e., that the people of Guatemala should have sufficient financial resources and access to nutritious food where they live. We can clearly see the correlation between agriculture and land owned by a few people and that children and the population become malnourished. Since private ownership is common, it is difficult for smaller companies and families to compete with the large corporations that mostly export and make huge financial gains.

Step 1: The solution should focus on solving corruption in the country from the very beginning, making sure that their laws and governance function as a proper democracy. This solves the problems because then everyone in the population gets an opportunity to have their say on the situation and can confidently turn to the police and the judicial system in case of crime and problems and be able to get support to start up their cultivation business, which can then increase their competitiveness on land.

According to the University of Gothenburg, the world is now more corrupt and non-democratic than it has been in the two last decades. Between 2002 and 2022, the number of countries experiencing decline in democracy has increased from 13 to 42 countries (Göteborgs universitet, 2023). Despite these pessimistic figures, there are countries that have emerged from autocratization. Eight countries have recently become a more democratic society, among these are other countries in Latin America such as Bolivia and Ecuador. These countries have succeeded thanks to restoration of an independent judicial system with free and fair elections and the removal of authoritarian leaders. This shows that there is hope for Guatemala to have a well-functioning society again.

So, in order to eradicate corruption, current leaders need to be removed from power and democratic elections and laws introduced. In addition, care must be taken to keep different political parts separate so that they cannot govern society autocratically as at present. This is done through the help of organizations and movements that ensure that everything is done in a legal way and that a stable foundation is built. Without the human voice and opinions this is extremely difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Therefore protests, demonstrations and information about a possible brighter future should be shared with the inhabitants.

Step 2: In addition, most likely the solution requires a parallel agricultural reform. The distribution of cultivable land as it stands at the moment is untenable as the rich keep getting richer and through their oligarchy, can exploit the poorer in society making them even poorer. Changing the way soils are used in general, could benefit the country, the economy and the population. Give smaller growers a greater say in the market by providing training, information, advice and support to new businesses and cooperatives. There is a possibility that they could move towards a society more like the Western ones, where a few produces for their own country and they also produce for export. Sure, this may sound scary and too similar to the current and non-functioning system, but it can work in the context of laws. Together with strict rules about how much should go to their own population versus being exported. A free market is the best, all people should have the opportunity to produce food and grow to sell to others, but their economy at present is too damaged and vulnerable for smaller companies or families to even be able to compete. If for example grants are given to small businesses, they would have a chance to develop and make profit of the production just as the bigger companies do. Furthermore, the governments encouraging and supporting the cultivation that is neither self-sufficient nor export-oriented-but for the people-would help building a stable and democratic society.

Step 3: The third step in the solution is to educate the population to support improved cultivation methods with greater yields. It is important that everyone has the opportunity to grow, start a business and sell food within Guatemala even though they previously had nothing. Because as previously mentioned, larger and already established companies have an advantage because they have been in the industry, have the methods and the machines.

The training could take the form of lectures in villages, information sheets, videos or communities and gatherings where people can meet and exchange tips. This, together with the fact that it is not a free market, means that everything will not be about competition, but rather that people will benefit from helping and supporting their neighbors, etc.

Step 4: Along the way, it is very important to ensure that indigenous groups such as the Mayans receive increased support from the authorities. The indigenous population corresponds to a large part of the population with about 40% and finally gained democratic and free rights in 1996, but they still live in great poverty and lack any access to land ("Guatemala", Globalis, 2021). This means that conflicts over land areas have been and continue to be common. It is quite reasonable that revolutions and demonstrations have taken place over the years. It goes without saying that they are upset that larger companies are taking over the land that they have had access to since time immemorial. By offering the indigenous people access to land, poverty will be reduced. In addition, it stops the use of them as slaves as they can guarantee their own food security and control their dependence on others to a greater extent.

Organizations

Sida is one of the organizations that works against corruption to make people in the world feel a little better. Sida uses education as one of its means to prevent food insecurity. They train various locally based organizations, embassies, and authorities with which they cooperate. This makes it easier for them to recognize corruption, investigate it and see how to deal with it. Sida also works to strengthen intuitions and authorities so that everything is seen in the legal way. According to the organization, it is also corruption that affects the poorest in the country the most, they therefore believe that if you want to eradicate poverty in the world, which in turn is the biggest factor in food insecurity, you must fight misery and corruption. This goes hand in hand with my solutions in that education and the eradication of corruption are the most important parts for more people to feel better and avoid malnutrition.

Hunger and its problems are due to structural causes in society. Therefore, the state should resolve the situation by changing the distribution of income and land. But due to the corruption and other non-legal management they instead take advantage of the fact that they receive aid from several other countries in the world such as Sweden and use it for private activities. Between the years 1998-2015, Sweden alone has donated 2.74 billion kronor to Guatemala, which is extremely much. But at the same time, the proportion of undernourished has increased rather than decreased, which indicates that development assistance has gone to other things. Thus, it does not seem that malnutrition or the private ownership of large farms is about to resolve itself, but rather that it will remain an issue in the coming years. That is why it is extremely important that we act and do something about the problems now before more people suffer from chronic malnutrition. Stated facts in this paragraph is collected from "omvärlden berättar" which was published in 2015.

Conclusion

Corruption hinders development in a country, as it means that people do not trust each other and especially not those in power. It violates people's rights, hampers economic growth, and reduces access to healthcare, education, home, food, water, and sanitation. A lot of the things that people in the western world take for granted that are extremely important for a well-functioning society are missing for large parts of the Guatemalan population. Chronic malnutrition is a direct consequence of corruption and the skewed distribution of land with private ownership. One solution to malnutrition is to first address the corruption with support from organizations, by dismantling current structures and by ensuring education for the people. The government has lost the people's faith and trust due to the corruption and conflicts that they caused during centuries. To be able to build a stable society the trust needs to be regained which can be difficult to achieve and most likely takes several years to achieve. The important thing to remember is that we from the outside world always can make initiatives and investments for it to work as smoothly as possible. But if we want to solve the problem in a perspective of long term, the peoples will and their trust to the government is the key. Therefore, this solution or plan out of the crisis is going to take very long time, much energy and force from the government and the volition of the people to work, but it is possible.

Sources:

- [Globalis-Guatemala \(17/2-2023\)](#)
- [Kehityslehti-Guatemala: America's hungriest country \(1/3-2023\)](#)
- [Kehityslehti-Nutrient-poor food gives children in Guatemala weak food for life \(1/3-2023\)](#)
- [Official Journal of the European Union \(18/03/2023\)](#)
- [Omvärlden berättar-Why are Guatemala's children starving? \(15/3/2023\)](#)
- [Plan international-Guatemala \(15/9-2023\)](#)
- [Regeringen- Guatemala, human rights, democracy \(15/9-2023\)](#)
- [Sida- Work in Guatemala \(12/3-2023\)](#)
- [Tidningen global- abort rights and laws \(15/9-2023\)](#)
- [University of Gothenburg-World increasingly authoritarian – but there is hope \(15/3-2023\)](#)