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Guatemala: Expanding and Enhancing Education in Urban and Rural Communities

There's a Guatemalan-Mayan legend centered around soothing the minds of children by having them tell their stressors to Las Muñecas Quitapenas, or worry dolls, to make them go away. Children in Guatemala face widespread poverty, violence, and malnutrition, especially those located in Indigenous and rural parts of the country. Young children require guidance and support from parents, as well as educational instruction, to set themselves up for success. However, in a country where parents and children are left uneducated with structural barriers to overcome, this support is often limited. Las Muñecas Quitapenas should hear about first-day jitters, making friends, and the project they “forgot” to tell their mom about, not how they cannot afford a quality education or have access to one. Worry dolls can't make those stressors go away, but bringing awareness to this issue can.

Guatemala is a small country in Central America with a large population and the highest population growth in Latin America (CIA). Guatemala covers 108,890 km², nearly the size of the United States midsize state— Kentucky. Guatemala has a population of 17,980,803 people, about half living in rural areas and the other residing in urban areas. A presidential representative of a democratic republic governs Guatemala: Bernardo Arévalo is the current president as of January 2024. The agricultural sector in Guatemala is quite large with 43% of Guatemala's land under cultivation (USAID), which is used to grow crops such as bananas, coffee, and sugarcane (International Trade Administration). The average farm size in Guatemala is relatively small, averaging around $\frac{1}{3}$ acre (Roots of Peace), compared to the average farm size in the U.S.— 445 acres. Guatemala is located in the northern hemisphere, but takes on more of a tropical climate, with little to no difference in season. Instead, it experiences a dry season, November to April, and a rainy season, May to October. Guatemala is roughly divided into four geographical regions: the central western highlands, the low northern plateau (mostly jungle), the southern volcanic belt, and the tropical coastal lowlands (Countryreports). These climatic and geographical features contribute to Guatemala's high biodiversity which makes it one of the most diverse nations on the planet.

The average household in Guatemala comprises around five members with the father as the patriarch. Women take on a more domestic role and are expected to focus on maintaining the house, cooking, cleaning, and childcare (AFS-USA). With Guatemala's rapid population growth, the country has experienced housing deficits that are recently estimated at 1.3 million homes resulting in about 50% of the population, most of whom are Indigenous, lacking adequate housing. Many families are forced to scavenge for housing materials like mud, cane, and tarp (Sagarino). The typical Guatemalan diet is low in nutritional value due to the high consumption of low-nutrient foods like corn tortillas, beans, and grains as well as the low consumption of high-nutrient foods like meat. Many families get their food from traditional outdoor markets, but in urban areas, supermarkets are more popular (Peace Corps).

Guatemala has the largest economy in Central America and industries like agriculture, servicing, and manufacturing comprise most of the country's economy... Other major exports include chemical products, crude petroleum, and cardamom. Despite jobs such as healthcare, customer service, and financial services having the highest employment rates, much of Guatemala's rural population is still employed by low-wage agriculture, where some farmers may make only 3 to 4 US dollars a day. Even though the average wage in Guatemala is 5,350 USD or 41,915 GTQ (Guatemalan Quetzal) much of Guatemala's rural population lives in poverty which can be traced to their geographic isolation and ethnic exclusion (USAID). Because of severe inequities in resource distribution and government attention between Guatemala's urban and rural populations. Many families in rural areas of Guatemala are left with no access to necessities like clean water, health care, nutritional food, sanitation services, and educational

services. The absence of these services could prevent families from having the resources needed to live a successful life, further pushing them into poverty. Basic healthcare in the city is relatively accessible and free to all Guatemalan citizens, but specialized services may be harder to come by due to an extremely low-funded healthcare system which only amounted to about 289 USD per person in 2020. As for sanitation in rural areas, more than 30% of the population lack access to any kind of sanitation service which can also contribute to many other issues that affect rural populations like health and nutrition.

Concerning the educational system in Guatemala, most teenagers do not pursue secondary schooling. With 41% of all teenagers unenrolled from school, which worsens to 61% in rural areas (USAID), Guatemalan children are deprived of a quality education. The low-quality public education affects students in both rural and urban areas: one of these families was my own. My mother's and grandmother's education were both heavily affected by this issue. My grandmother and her family suffered greatly due to financial instability and poor healthcare, leaving her to become a part of the 41% of teenagers unenrolled in school, only making it to fifth grade. My mother and her family paid copious amounts of money and traveled many miles to receive quality instruction from a private institution. Traveling as far as Germany for tertiary education, which is a common experience for families in Guatemala. These families are burdened by the choice between sending their children to severely underfunded public schools that lack adequate resources or paying high tuition payments and traveling for private education. While primary school enrollment rates have increased over the last 20 years (USAID), the quality of schooling students receive is hindered by extremely low government funding. According to USAID, Guatemala's government spends only 2.8% of its GDP on education, which is far less than the regional average. Without acceptable funding, schools can experience a lack of resources, inexperienced teachers, and overall low student achievement rates.

Students in rural areas are facing more than just low-quality public schooling, they also face... inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and high education-related costs" (Broken Chalk). Unfortunately, the quality of education in rural parts of Guatemala is also dependent on the importance of agriculture and land use. Much of the agricultural sector relies on unoccupied land; consequently, infrastructure is heavily limited, including schools. As stated earlier, many impoverished families, including children, living in rural Guatemala are employed by low-wage agriculture. Many families cannot afford to send their children away from work to seek an education. Not only is the education problem in Guatemala affected by low government funding, but the importance of agriculture in rural and Indigenous communities creates harmful barriers to families in those areas.

My solution to help Guatemala's academic system in both rural and urban areas would be executed in three steps: increase funding, expand access and quality of educational resources such as schools, teachers, and teaching materials to all communities, and offer incentives to help families who can't afford to send their children to school. A major critique of Guatemala's government is the lack of public spending. If Guatemala's government could slightly increase spending on its educational system with a higher focus on children in rural areas, public schools would provide a higher quality education. It does have to be considered that raising government spending is a very political process that Guatemala might not be able to manage due to its struggles with corruption; therefore, the use of an outside source for funding could help take some of the stress off the government while also providing the necessary funds. Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is an organization solely meant to help education systems in low-income countries. GPE has devoted 10,900,000 USD and is currently helping Guatemala further its education system, but by further adding a focus on incentives for rural and Indigenous communities and teacher qualifications, Guatemala can produce a high-quality education for students in all areas. With an expansion in funding, step 2 of the solution can begin.

The new money allocated to the academic system will be used to increase the quality and quantity of teaching materials, such as books, chalkboards, paper materials, and desks. Much of a student's education

comes from not only the information they are taught but also from the environment they are being taught in. Without a comfortable learning environment, children will struggle regardless of the quality of instruction they receive. Another area that can be addressed by an increase in budget is stricter qualifications for Guatemalan teachers. Most Guatemalan teachers only have a high school level education and no exposure to children's development or literacy instruction (Child Aid), and because no college degree is required many teachers are unprepared to educate students at the level they deserve. An increased focus on teacher readiness is required. This can be achieved by requiring higher qualifications or developing schooling for teachers with a broader focus on child development and interactions. Also Ensuring a teacher has mastered the course being taught can increase the quality of a student's education dramatically. There can also be a focus on training more teachers to teach in rural and Indigenous communities as language barriers are among the greater challenges in those areas. If people who speak those languages are trained to teach, a much larger demographic of Guatemala's population will have access to schooling. The final area I want to address regarding the expansion of funding is increasing access to public schools in rural areas. As previously mentioned much of the land in rural Guatemala is currently being used for agriculture or is preserved for later agricultural usage, this contributes to the lack of built schools in those areas. To combat this issue while simultaneously ensuring children in those areas have access to a school near them, I propose that schools incorporate the importance of agriculture. Schools can be built around a small-scale farm field where students can learn about agriculture and how to make a living in that industry if they choose to. Another advantage to this program is schools can introduce environmental knowledge such as how climate change is affecting their agricultural industry and ways to better other parts of their environment like soil degradation through regenerative agricultural practices. Once the overall quality of Guatemala's academic system has begun to improve the final step can begin.

A large barrier for the rural and Indigenous communities in accessing education is the cost or loss of a child's income. A way to allow children to receive instruction while also ensuring their families are supported is by offering financial support for families that send their children to school. In exchange for sending their child to school, families with farms can be rewarded with money to allocate solely to farm improvements such as farm equipment, fertilizer, and seeds. Farmers can also choose to sponsor a child's education by sending them to school and providing them with the necessary supplies to do so. In return, they will receive a smaller amount of money for each child sponsored. This money can only be used to further the efficiency of the farm. Finally, for families that cannot afford to send their child to school for reasons such as school expenses or the child working for wages in an industry other than agriculture, the family can receive money to allocate towards either household expenses or school supplies. As for the money these families or farms are receiving, the government will play a role in deciding which families or farms qualify for the program and how much money they will receive, which will depend on the needs of the family. The money would have to be distributed in a way where it can only be used for its intended purposes. To ensure no one is taking advantage of the program the government and schools will have to continuously verify that each child enrolled in the program is attending school.

To promote the accessibility of the program to Indigenous communities, the Guatemalan government can partner with an Indigenous rights group such as ALDEA(Advancing Local Development through Empowerment and Actions) and ABPD(Asociación Bienestar, progreso, Desarrollo) which is a partnership between a U.S based and Guatemalan based organization that work together to address the principal needs of rural, predominantly Mayan, communities in the Department of Chimaltenango in Guatemala. Working with a trusted Indigenous rights organization is an important addition to the program to increase the trust the Indigenous citizens have in the program furthering their children's education. A partnership of this kind can also introduce a new perspective into the program and aid in making sure that the needs of rural Indigenous communities are being actively addressed.

My solution is complex and comes with high costs, however, with better quality education available to Guatemalan youth, more children will have the opportunity to pursue higher schooling, which will make higher-paying jobs more accessible. Not only will children in rural areas have a chance to be lifted out of poverty, but through teachings on environmental issues, Guatemala will have a more informed population which can hopefully help combat issues like climate change and deforestation. Both of these factors are actively influencing the country's agricultural industry. As a whole, my recommendations allow students in urban and rural parts of Guatemala to have access to high-quality instruction, thus allowing Guatemala's youth to have better opportunities to further their lives and live comfortably. Many of the issues the country is having are addressed: funding, accessibility, resources, and teacher readiness are all considered. Nevertheless, the system has a long way to go. The solutions proposed only cover primary and secondary schooling as the challenges affecting tertiary education (university) go much deeper. In 2023, the only publicly funded university in the country, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, was shut down due to the university's engagement with political corruption surrounding the most recent election. Although the university has reopened as of 2024, for Guatemala's education system to reach its full potential the government must fix its issues with corruption and put high importance on its citizens, especially those in rural communities. Without help from a strong and honest government, Guatemala's citizens will continue to be deprived of one of the most important aspects of life: education.

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