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Guatemala- Giving the Indigenous People More Power and Helping the Poor Get Richer

Guatemala was once a home to the prosperous Mayan Civilization. It is a mountainous country with narrow coastal plains and limestone plateaus. Guatemala was conquered by Spain around 1523 and now it is the most populous country in Central America with roughly 14 million people. Guatemala has a history of civil war, but since 1996 it has been peaceful. Their government is a constitutional democratic republic.

One of the main dilemmas in Guatemala is a problem with the distribution of wealth and food. The margin between the wealthy and poor is quite evident. Guatemala has been having social problems between the upper class and indigenous people, who are very poor. Most of the indigenous people live in isolated rural areas, away from hospitals, schools, and social institutions. The indigenous people of Guatemala are often neglected and ignored. They are of Mayan descent. Most of the indigenous people are illiterate and do not speak Spanish very well, which is a major problem when looking for work. There are 25 different languages spoken in the country, however Spanish is the official language. Nearly half of the country's population is rural, which is nearly seven million people and five million of those are poor. The power of big business is another issue which needs to be resolved.

Guatemala produces several different agriculture products. The main products are coffee, sugar, bananas, cardamon, vegetables, flowers, plants, timber, rice and rubber. Problems with food insecurity are common in Guatemala. The most common cause of food insecurity is the price of food, conflicts between indigenous and other citizens and unfair treatment of women. Gender inequality in education is apparent. Life is difficult for Guatemala people because Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. It is especially hard for subsistence farm families with recent events between big business and farmers.

Life for a subsistence farm family in Guatemala is difficult. The typical family consists of six members, but if you add in the extended family it is more. Grandparents tend to live with their children. Most children in Guatemala receive only about three to six years of schooling. The closest medical facilities are often over two hours away through mountains and valleys, so travel is difficult. Their diet mostly consists of corn products like tortillas with rice and black beans. Over half of the children of Guatemala suffer from malnutrition. The farms are not very big especially since big business and large land owners have been removing subsistence farmers and using the land for cash crops like coffee and sugar. Typically, subsistence farmers grow corn, beans and rice.

One of the prevalent issues is the greed of large land owners. Guatemala already has enough problems producing food with weather concerns and the large land owners kicking out all the indigenous subsistence farmers. The large land owners, or big business, are giving the subsistence farmers less land. This makes the wealthy richer and the underprivileged poorer and hungry. The smaller supply of food doesn't hurt the wealthy; it only hurts the poor and the subsistence farmers because now they are not able to grow enough food to sell. The farmers have hardly enough food to feed themselves. Employment does increase when the large land owners build plantations, but the workers hardly make anything—these workers would take just about any job to make money so they have something to spend on food. This causes the price of two basic foods to rise: corn and black beans. Intentionally or unintentionally, big business has caused this. With less subsistence farms to produce food, the price of these two staple foods has risen and this prevents the rural poor from being able to purchase food, which causes the economy to

crumble. Basically what is happening is big business is driving out the indigenous people with the help of the government. The indigenous people are powerless and cannot do anything about it except become unemployed and try to find work on one of the plantations. Plantations produce cash crops. This battle is like a mouse trying to fight a lion. The mouse will never win.

One of the major problems of nutrition in Guatemala is the lack of meat and proteins. Yes, black beans do have protein but they don't provide some of the amino acids that meat has. Children have chronic malnutrition and without the right proteins their bodies simply stop growing. According to www.savethechildren.org, Guatemala has the highest rate in chronic malnutrition in Latin America for children under the age of five. The national chronic malnutrition rate is about 49 percent. The rates of the indigenous people are far higher.

Conflicts between the indigenous people and the wealthy large land owners need to be addressed. Guatemala went through a civil war from 1960-1996 and most of the indigenous people fought as guerillas. The government often neglects the indigenous people because they are the poorest. This situation is very serious because the large land owners exploit the land and make the soil unfit for growing crops and this affects the subsistence farmers and the food output. The rural poor are at a clear disadvantage in this situation because they don't have the power to stop it. The only people that have the power to stop it are in the government, and the government is more likely to support the wealthy because they make the government wealthier.

The Guatemalan government had an indigenous president in 2006, but he is no longer in power and the indigenous people are being taking advantage of. Incredibly, it is not as bad as it used to be. In 2012 there was an 80 day protest by the indigenous people in Guatemala City (according to Seattlepi). The government stalled and said the new president would talk to them later. This happened in March. In July a similar incident took place. Armed security forces chased even more farmers off land that is used to produce food (according to Treehugger). They are using this land for something completely different. European Biofuel companies are moving in and growing crops for ethanol. This hurts the indigenous, especially the farmers. The Guatemalan Government could easily step in and demand that the European companies pay cash for the farmers' land instead of chasing them out.

Since 1996 things have been slightly better, but not by much. The cash crops have been making Guatemala very rich but only one percent of the population controls 65 percent of the total wealth. The top five percent of the population controls 85 percent of the wealth. Over 81 percent of the poor and 91 percent of the extremely poor live in the countryside. Poverty has been increasing. Over 60 percent of Guatemalans live in poverty. It is estimated that over 30 percent live in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty is defined as the severe lack of material possessions or money. Living on \$1.25 a day in the United States is described as living in extreme poverty.

Other major issues including droughts and weather conditions have been affecting the distribution of food. Droughts affect the output of the crops of subsistence farmers and this puts them in a cycle of debt. Because they hardly have enough food to feed their own families, they don't have any additional food to sell. Then the large land owners demand money for using the land or they will remove the farmers off the land. This is basically a trap where the subsistence farmer will never win without help. When it comes to infrastructure, one of the main things Guatemala lacks is roads connecting small rural villages to medical facilities. Hospitals and doctors are greatly needed. When you consider that 50 percent of the population of Guatemala lives in rural areas with most of the doctors in Guatemala City, it illustrates a major problem. Doctors need to be available to address the malnourishment issues in the rural areas. This is more evidence that the government only cares about the cities and not the rural areas and that the indigenous people do not have the facilities and services they need.

What is happening in Guatemala is nothing new in history. The U.S. had similar problems with the relation between agriculture and big business in the late 1800s. Big business was fixing prices on the farmers and forcing them into poverty. It wasn't as severe as what is happening in Guatemala, but this example will help prove my point. U.S. farmers started the populism movement and demanded reform in agriculture practices. The U.S. farmers were uneducated people. The U.S. government did not listen and the populism movement was a failure. Shortly after this the progressive movement started and was led by educated middle class people. They were successful because they found ways to make people and the government listen. They used journalism and wrote books that exposed the woes of farming life. Change happened. There are three things that determine the success of change: the social and economic position of the person who is promoting change, the actual need of change, and how far the change deviates from social norms. My point is the Guatemalan government isn't going to listen to the poor, uneducated indigenous farmers, they haven't for many years so why start now? What might happen if the indigenous people start becoming more educated middle class people like merchants and small business owners and then started demanding change? My solution is to give better education opportunities to the indigenous people who are so often neglected and ignored. Maybe instead of the government spending money on firearms they should try spending that money on an extra school or two. By making the indigenous people educated, maybe some of them will run for positions in the government and they will pass laws that will benefit the indigenous people rather than hurt them. However, Guatemala has been in a chaotic poverty state for so long that social change will not be easy. It will take both sides to work together to create a better Guatemala.

Another suggestion is to make laws that protect poor indigenous subsistence farmers. Many cannot read or write in Spanish which makes it very difficult to defend themselves. One of the first things I would do is to educate the poor on how to defend themselves from the wealthy. This is very hard because sometimes the rich do not follow rules or sometimes they use bribes and other means to find a way around a law.

The first MDG I would suggest working on is gender equality for females. Females are often mistreated and abused. Femicide is very common in Guatemala. Women are looked down upon. Families do not think it is necessary for girls to become educated and this puts women at a disadvantage. There is an online article from Compassion.com about a girl in Guatemala named Silvia. She was sponsored by a childhood education program called Compassion which helps fund education for children in poverty. Her father was completely against sending her to school and he was very abusive towards Silva's mother. Her father wanted her to go work in the plantations because that is where he worked when he was younger. Parents sending children to work is nothing new. They need money and do not value education especially when it comes to girls. Silva stayed in school and progressed and eventually went to college. She is now helping people in her area. This is a rare success story. In time, hopefully, we will hear more.

The second MDG I would suggest working on is halving the poverty level from 60 percent to 30 percent through education. Instead of having most children only receive four years of schooling, I would suggest doubling it so those students can get better jobs. The government and large land owners should help fund schools and stop being greedy. If the government would invest in education, it would help out the population in the long run.

The government should increase the minimum wage law for workers. It is currently at about one dollar an hour. The government needs to start creating more jobs. If the government invests in education, they can create more jobs by needing more teachers. They also need to supply more doctors in rural areas. That investment in education for doctors would also help produce more jobs. Save The Children is an organization that is operating in Guatemala. They have been focusing on improving the rural poor's access to high quality education, the integration of child protection norms, and government decision

making (according to savethechildren.org). What makes Save the Children a good organization is that it provides assistance in the areas of Guatemala that are in the worst shape. Their target areas are located where indigenous people live where children's chronic malnutrition rates are about 78 percent, far higher than the national average of 49 percent. Save the Children realizes that in order to turn things around you must start with the children and when children aren't being given the right amount of nutrients it affects their learning ability and work ability because they just don't have the energy. This stalls any kind of educational progress.

The role of the national government needs to be increased throughout the country. The national government is truly the only organization that can turn Guatemala around. Independent organizations can only do so much. There is much demand throughout the world for helpful independent organizations, so they are spread thin and they can not concentrate on one just one country. Guatemala needs more representation from the indigenous people. More organizations need to set up educational facilities for the poor in rural, isolated areas. If more organizations participate, they could help the organizations who are currently in operation. Credit for farmers backed by a good and trustful bank would help tremendously. Rural farmers in Guatemala are a dying breed and their voice needs to be heard. It all starts with the indigenous rural farmers and if they set their minds to it, change could come eventually. What is happening to Guatemala is terrible. Living on two dollars a day, it is impossible to provide food for the family, especially when food prices are going up and subsistence farmers are being forced to leave their land. Government reform is needed, but currently the government is going in the opposite direction that is needed. The government needs to stop hurting its people and stop helping big business. If indigenous people were in the government seats some of this would stop and the government would not take away land from their people. The indigenous people need to demand change, but first they need to get back on their feet and it all starts with the children. If the indigenous children are educated properly they can slowly change their own fate in a positive way. There is one thing the average American could do. I stated earlier several farms in Guatemala are being used by biofuel companies. We could boycott these companies because they are indirectly killing the Guatemalan people. And with the current drought in Iowa, ethanol will be in higher demand especially since gas prices will probably rise. The change that is needed must come in the people's hearts that run the government. They are aware of the oppression, but they will need to sacrifice their own profit to get Guatemala out of this big hole. Some politicians could live with the indigenous people for a week. That might help open their eyes and their hearts. The fate rests in their hands. Hopefully change will come, but it will only come once the government and big business have a change of heart.

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