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Helping the Poorest Achieve Social Success in Ecuador

Ecuador. Equator. The words sound a bit alike, and most people know that Ecuador is located on the equator. However, many people may not be aware that one of the mountain peaks in Ecuador is actually further from the center of the Earth than Mt. Everest (CIA). They may not know penguins live on Ecuador's Galapagos Islands (Lands and Peoples). And most people probably do not realize more than 60 percent of Ecuador's rural population lives in poverty (Rural Poverty Portal).

Ecuador is a country facing the crisis of widespread poverty. The total population of Ecuador is just over fifteen million people and 33 percent of Ecuadorian citizens, or about five million people, live in rural areas (CIA). Several possible reasons exist for the poverty in this country. Most of the poverty occurs in the Sierra or highland region of central Ecuador. This could be attributed to the country not having enough agricultural land to support the region's large rural population (Lands and Peoples). It also could be explained by soil erosion in the highland area (CIA). However, the reality is the majority of the land in this area is owned by just one percent of the population. The indigenous people either work this land, receiving little compensation, or are forced to practice subsistence agriculture, growing only enough for the immediate family to survive (Lands and Peoples):

In addition to the poverty in Ecuador, hunger exists. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) combines three statistics - undernourished population; underweight population under five years of age; and mortality rate under five years of age - to get an index number that can be compared globally. Ecuador's GHI was 7.2 in the year 2010. This is a moderate rating, meaning that hunger is existent in measurable amounts in the country (Global Hunger Index). The Millennium Development Goals are a set of goals put in place by the United Nations. One of these goals is to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty by 2015. Because it would be impossible to completely wipe out hunger and poverty, a standard of reducing the hunger and poverty by half was set. Ecuador is very close to reaching this goal. However, there is still the need for progress in order to not just reach this goal, but to surpass it (Millennium Development Goals). Cultural discrimination, complicated by geographic issues, has prevented the indigenous people from prospering in the Ecuadorian highlands.

Ecuador is split into four distinct geographical and climactic areas. The Galapagos Islands are located off the coast of Ecuador and have a very diverse ecosystem well known by biology experts around the world (Encyclopedia of Nations). The Costa region is mostly rich agricultural lowland along Ecuador's Pacific coast (Lands and Peoples). Many Ecuador's export products, such as bananas and cacao, are grown here (Encyclopedia of Nations). The Amazon Rainforest makes up the Oriente region of Ecuador. There is little agriculture here because the dense forest makes the land difficult to develop. However, the focus of this essay will be on the Sierra region in central Ecuador. This region encompasses the highlands of the Andes Mountains where the majority of Ecuador's population lives. In this area of the country, many agricultural workers are present, but little individually owned agricultural land exists. The Sierra region has a perpetual spring-like climate and is known for the green fields which blanket the land (Lands and Peoples). This may seem like an ideal place to live; however, most of the rural poverty in Ecuador is concentrated in this region (Rural Poverty Portal).

A typical rural family is of indigenous or mestizo heritage. They likely speak Spanish and have three or more children. This family most likely lives in poverty and practices subsistence agriculture on one or two acres of land (Lands and Peoples). Subsistence agriculture is defined as growing only enough food to provide for the family. They often grow potatoes and corn for their family's consumption, with barley,

wheat, beans, rye and lentils also being important crops (Lands and Peoples). The children are encouraged to attend school as conservative values are commonplace among the citizens of the Sierra region; however, poor school facilities, lack of teachers, and the need for labor on the farm often force the students to drop out and remain at home (Culture Grams). Children in this culture have little chance of enjoying a more prosperous life when they marry. This is because of a rigid social system which is rooted in archaic tradition. The businessmen and landowners of Spanish descent are at the top of this social system. The landowners own “latifundios” where they grow export crops such as bananas and cacao, similar to plantations in America. This person often employs people to work the land for a meager wage, not nearly enough for a high-quality life (Lands and Peoples). Lower on the social scale are the artisans who sell their products in the cities. At the bottom of the system are the mestizos and the indigenous farmers, with the mestizos (people of indigenous and European heritage) having a slightly higher rank. This social system greatly discriminates against the indigenous citizens of Ecuador who make up one-fourth of the population (Lands and Peoples).

The rural poor also experience hunger and nutrient deficiencies in Ecuador as a result of their poverty and lack of social voice. Because the indigenous people practice mainly subsistence agriculture, the amount and variety of nutrition they receive is greatly limited (Lands and Peoples). As a result, the incidence of under-nutrition is higher in the indigenous population. This can be seen as a direct result of the cultural discrimination caused by Ecuador’s social structure. If the indigenous people owned more land, which is improbable due to the social system, they would be able to produce crops for sale to buy food for their families, increasing the variety of foods available. This would allow them to receive more adequate nutrition (“Nutrition”).

In addition to the obvious challenges of the social system and lack of arable land in the mountainous Sierra region, other environmental problems further complicate the situation of the indigenous people of Ecuador. The land that is available for agriculture has been degraded through years of intense production. This is because although the subsistence farmers used their land as efficiently as possible, they may not have realized they were not preserving the quality of the land (Rural Poverty Portal). Another challenge for the indigenous farmer are the El Niño and La Niña weather patterns. During El Niño, excessive rain can cause mudslides and flooding which is followed by drought during La Niña (Culture Grams). Other environmental issues include soil erosion and desertification (CIA).

Although this analysis may appear bleak, the situation was once worse in Ecuador. In 1990, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) for Ecuador was 12.9 which was considered serious. Ecuador’s GHI had been reduced to 7.2 by 2010 and ranked 16th in the world among countries with hunger problems. This rating is considered moderate, which means, although the situation is improving, hunger and nutrition problems still exist and must be addressed (Global Hunger Index). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set by the United Nations in 2000 with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. One of the standards outlined by the MDGs is the reduction of poverty and hunger by half by the year 2015. To date, Ecuador has reduced the percentage of its population under age five that is underweight by about 35 percent. It is improvement, but it is not quite a reduction of half, and the deadline is approaching quickly. Ecuador could reach this goal if the country continues to improve the nutrition available to its people, especially the rural indigenous population (Millennium Development Goals).

The main obstacle to the success of Ecuador’s indigenous population is the lack of good agricultural land, so that farmers can provide their families with food and also generate income (Rural Poverty Portal). They have little access to arable land because of the area in which they live. They are not able to freely change careers because of the rigid social structure in Ecuador (Culture Grams). If these people had the power to decide their own careers, they would be much more likely to be able to provide for themselves (Rural Poverty Portal).

Several possible solutions could address the various issues presented in this essay. However, I believe the most serious challenge to the rural population of Ecuador is the discriminatory social system which prevents the indigenous people from providing for their families. Therefore, the people of Ecuador, the Ecuadorian government, and other world organizations must reform this social system which has defined life for many Ecuadorians for centuries. Reforming the social structure may be a result of increased economic opportunities for the indigenous people, and, therefore, increased ability to provide for their families. This is because the social system is based mainly on income which happens to be very low for the indigenous people. If the income of the indigenous people is increased through economic opportunity, the social structure would have less influence in the lives of indigenous Ecuadorians.

One solution that would effectively increase the income of the subsistence farmers would be increasing their agricultural outputs. If the farmers were able to produce enough food for their families plus extra crops to market, they would achieve food security. They would also have additional income which they could use to purchase goods and services previously not available to them. This income would also help them to move up on the social scale.

The Ecuadorian government currently is trying to alleviate widespread poverty through territorial development. The idea involves creating trade opportunities in similar areas of the country. Traditional rural development usually involves increasing agricultural productivity. However, the goal of territorial development is to develop rural areas to create opportunities that augment the agricultural aspects of the region (Rural Poverty Portal). This idea is valid and has great potential to increase the economic standing of the indigenous people. The people would be able to produce other consumer goods or provide services that are not solely dependent on agriculture. This allows them to have an income source with which they can purchase nutritious food and other goods that would increase their quality of life and social standing.

Let's talk about plans of action and outcomes which could occur if these two ideas were put into practice and allowed to unfold:

Nearly three million rural citizens live in poverty in Ecuador (Rural Poverty Portal). The government endeavors to increase the income of these citizens because, logically, this would reduce poverty. The government creates several initiatives with the help of international organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, and United States Feed Grains Council to help the rural people create more income for themselves.

The first step in the plan is to increase the agricultural production so the citizens feel they have adequate food to survive. This is accomplished by sending well-trained experts to the villages near the subsistence farmers. These experts help the farmers improve their agricultural practices including fertilization to improve the land, introducing crop varieties that are bred to have higher yields, and promoting conservation practices to preserve the land. If the farmers choose to use these techniques on their farms, the government could provide assistance to reduce the cost of the enhanced agricultural practices.

Many farmers choose to try the new methods on their land. Soon, they begin to experience increased yields with better quality products. The farmers have more than enough crops to feed their families and want to market the remainder.

The next step involves creating a viable market for the surplus crops the farmers produce. This entails the creation of markets in the nearby villages. The farmers bring their crops to the market and are able to sell them to the more economically sufficient consumers in the area. As a result, the farmers make a profit on their surplus crops. They become more independent from the experts and the government funding. From this point on, the farmers create their own opportunities.

One farmer might notice that although there are many potato vendors at the market, there are fewer people selling fresh meat. The farmer decides to grow corn and raise a few cattle on his farm in order to diversify his operation. As a result, the family consumes more protein and makes a niche for themselves at their local market.

A neighbor has a similar experience, but he decides to process the wheat he grows and make flour. He sells this product to a former farmer who is now a baker. The baker makes bread which he can market in the village for a higher profit than he made as a farmer.

Another farmer sees the opportunity to use the talent of family members to create other goods for sale in addition to his crops. His family begins making baskets and pottery to sell at the market. Soon the demand for the products grows so much he decides to cease farming in order to focus on the family business. He sells his land to neighbors, such as the farmer who has expanded his operation to cattle.

Yet, another farmer who has embraced sustainable farming practices may see the other people around him who are still practicing subsistence agriculture. He decides to make a difference by making his farm an example of the practices which were first introduced by the experts. He is considered a leader in the community and helps the subsistence farmers employ these methods on their farms and they begin to see the results that the other farmers have experienced.

The government sees a reduction in the population living in poverty and the number of malnourished citizens in Ecuador. However, the officials also find a result they had not anticipated. The social system, which had been so rigid, has changed. The people who were at the bottom of the system are now creating opportunities for themselves and experiencing improved quality of life. Class boundaries are being crossed because the distinction between the classes has been blurred. The rural citizens of Ecuador have become self-sufficient and are more respected by the rest of the population.

These outcomes may seem idealistic, but they are not without merit. If the subsistence farmers can increase their economic standing with minimal help from the government, they will be more likely to sustain the development and to continue growing into the future. In addition, a higher income will allow for a higher quality of life, which will place the indigenous people on a more competitive level with the higher socioeconomic citizens.

In Ecuador, the indigenous people are at a disadvantage due to a rigid social structure that is antiquated. They are at the bottom of this system which prevents them from providing for their families. They currently farm about one or two acres of land in the Andean highlands, often practicing subsistence agriculture. They cannot marry into a better life because of class restrictions. As a result, poverty, hunger, and malnutrition are recognized as challenges in Ecuador. Although these issues are being resolved, they are still present and cause for concern. I believe the best method for resolving these problems is by reforming the social structure which currently defines the place an Ecuadorian citizen can hold in society. The best method, in my opinion, for changing the structure is by increasing the subsistence farmers' ability to generate income. The government of Ecuador must be involved to start the process of rural improvement; however, the role of the government should be reduced as the rural families become more independent. If the government continues to be overly involved in the rural development, the growth will not be sustainable, and the situation will not improve to its full potential. The government should bring in experts to help the subsistence farmers improve their agricultural practices. Yields should increase and farmers will begin to market their surplus crops and receive an income. As farmers feel more secure in their financial situation, they may investigate other sources of income, diversify their farming operations, and help the other subsistence farmers realize the same success. The former subsistence farmers will have gained significant ground in the battle against the social system because they will be more respected by other citizens and have a higher income to support their families. This will allow future generations of

indigenous Ecuadorians to have more freedom to choose their own path in life rather than being sentenced to a life of subsistence agriculture.

Ecuador has the potential to move from a state of crisis to reaching the goal of eradicating poverty and hunger. Ecuador. Equator. In the near future, people may also associate the word “equality” with this South American country.

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