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Guatemala, Factor 15: Human Rights

Guatemala: Production, Use, and Treatment of Farmland

Introduction

The origins of the name “Guatemala” are unclear, but many theories have arisen as to how the name came to be. The most prominent and accepted theory is that the name came from a Mayan dialect during the 1500s, meaning “the land of the trees” or “the land of the forests.” Guatemala does indeed hold up to its name; today, forest covers between a quarter and a third of the country (Butler). As well as having dense forests, Guatemala is a mountainous country. While the forests and mountains may be stunning for tourists, these geographical traits pose huge problems for the citizens of Guatemala. These conditions make good farmland scarce and not easy to obtain. Most tracts of land are covered in trees and heavy shrubbery; this plant life makes large-scale farming operations difficult to create and maintain. The mountainous terrain also poses major problems to farmers as the steep slopes will cause runoff to erode and eliminate any potential farming grounds. Without proper farming methods and the deforestation of the rainforests, the soil will become unsuitable for farming. In a country with many agricultural problems, it still manages to grow a variety of crops such as maize, sorghum, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, a spice called cardamom, and coffee beans. With such a variety of foods, it is hard to believe that Guatemalans struggle to feed their families. But the facts state otherwise. The average consumption of calories in Guatemala is 2244 calories per person per day. When working long hours in manual labor, the recommended number of calories is 3,500 or more per day in order to maintain energy levels (“Most Malnourished Countries In The World”). Not only are calories a problem, but many Guatemalans cannot afford a wider variety of food, which leads to the loss of important micronutrients required for proper growth and development.

An estimate from July of 2011 places the population of Guatemala as 13,824,463 people, making Guatemala 69th in a ranking of population (“Guatemala”). The average family size is 5.9, or nearly 6, people per household (Esri). Also, family-owned farms are usually less than 2 hectares. Guatemalan staples include corn tortillas, rice, beans, and plantains. Most meals of Guatemalan families are no more complicated than the common staples due to the high prices. A meal consisting of corn tortillas and vegetable oil would cost \$0.40, while a meal including the aforementioned with the addition of carrots, oranges, beef, spinach, and black beans would cost \$0.72, nearly double (Braun 5). Purchasing this balanced diet would take three-quarters of the income of a person who lives on a dollar a day (Braun 5). Children, who are the most susceptible to inadequate nutrition, will not develop properly and will struggle with health as they grow older. As health becomes a growing concern for children, accessing a doctor is another problem Guatemalan families face. In Guatemala, 80% of the doctors live in Guatemala City, so rural families will have a difficult time reaching them. Education is another aspect of life that is affected by malnutrition. While schooling is free and compulsory for the ages seven to thirteen, Guatemala still sits at 74.5% literacy rates, the lowest in Central America (“Guatemala”). With Guatemala suffering a terrible humanitarian crisis, it is important to understand the problems facing the country before moving on to solve them. Guatemala is suffering from a lack of human rights caused by unfair distribution of land, foreign biofuel policies, and high food prices due to struggling local markets.

Problems

Without land, farmers cannot grow anything. Simply put, that is the problem Guatemalan farmers are facing. In Guatemala, 3.2% of the population owns 84% of the land, leaving less land for most of the population (Abbott). In 2000, the government organization called the Guatemala Land Fund (GLF) was put in charge of finding land for landless farmers in La Bendecion. To settle the farmers, GLF charged 7.7 million Quetzals, about one million dollars, for an abandoned coffee farm (Abbott). The farmers and the surrounding community paid much more than what the land is worth. GLF was unfair in its evaluation of the land and took advantage of the Guatemala community in its desperation to buy land. Oscar Barrios, the sitting president of the community association of La Bendecion, says, “The land was valued and zoned incorrectly; We were told it was land zoned for agriculture, but it is actually agro-forestry.” While the farmers wanted land solely for farming, the land they received is better suited for agro-forestry, which means that the land can be used for lumber and crops, but crops may struggle. The 5,500 acres sold to them also promised to contain three rivers on the land, but the plot contained only a single small stream (Abbott). To add on to the plethora of problems, the land always has strong, crop-devastating winds that blow through the area. Campesinos, a name for the rural farmers of Guatemala, have struggled to create an agricultural system that provides consistent food. Many have migrated to other countries, searching for other opportunities. While this may be affecting small-scale operations, bigger causes are also at play.

TIAA, a large pension fund company, prides itself on being socially responsible. But underneath its guise is the evidence of its destruction of the environment and its terrible labor relations with its farmland investments. With TIAA owning over 1.6 million acres of farmland worldwide, TIAA has become one of the largest investors of farmland (Farthing). The farmland it purchases in Guatemala is used mainly to produce palm oil. It is companies like TIAA that are taking land from the campesinos to produce more palm oil. They will go to extreme lengths to expand their reaches, such as the assassination of community leaders who are unwilling to sell their lands (Abbott). Per the Guatemala Institute of National Statistics, “The use of land for exports has risen 113 percent — or put another way, 1,400 acres of land that was previously used to produce staple foods were lost to the production of . . . palm oil.” The unfair treatment of the communities and campesinos has led to their inability to produce the necessary crops to provide adequate nutrition to their families. REPSA (Reforestada de Palma de Petén SA), a company linked to TIAA, has also caused many problems in Guatemala. In early 2015, REPSA had a major spill from one of its palm-oil mill effluent ponds. This spill entered a local river, the Pasión River, causing a contamination of a water source that affected the lives of roughly twelve thousand local families (Butler).

From the 1990s to 2006, Guatemala was receiving a surplus of subsidized American corn. These imports caused Guatemala to become dependent on the imports, and the price of corn dropped in Guatemala. Then, corn production in Guatemala dropped roughly 30 percent per capita due to farmers not being able to compete with the prices of U.S. corn (Rosenthal). While subsidized corn was being shipped to Guatemala, much of the land that was devoted to creating food for humans was converted into land for producing crops to supply biofuel plants. But in 2007, the United States needed more corn to reach its new Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS); therefore, the US cut off much of the corn it was exporting to Guatemala. When the policy was enacted, the local farmers had no land to produce the corn they once received from the US. Félix Pérez, a farmer from Guatemala, used to farm land behind his home; he now walks about 3 miles to get to a cheap hillside plot that he rents, and he says, “Every day it’s more difficult to survive since we live off the land, and there’s less and less” (Rosenthal). For farmers with large-scale operations, it is easier and more profitable to lease their land to the biofuel companies than it is to rent to subsistence farmers. Not only has the RFS caused problems for Guatemala, but the United States has felt its affects. When Congress passed the RFS, it made a miscalculation when “it sharply increased the overall mandate level and added targets for cellulosic (biofuel produced from cellulose, the stringy fiber of plants) and other advanced biofuels” because they expected more development in these fields (Elliott).

These advanced biofuels would not use food crops and would be more climate friendly but you can't blend a fuel that doesn't exist. In the United States, efforts to increase biofuel production, has created its own problem where "the ethanol market is becoming saturated, and the industry is running into a "blend wall"" due to the fact that most cars on the road can't take high levels of ethanol in their gas due to its corrosivity (Elliott). In a sense, no country has benefitted from the RFS, so why hasn't there been change? Misael Gonzáles of C.U.C., a labor union for campesinos, says, "These people don't have enough to eat. ... They can't eat biofuel, and they don't drive cars" (Rosenthal). Biofuel may have its upsides, but in Guatemala, where almost no biofuel is used domestically, it is easy to see how land for food crops has been unjustly used to produce biofuel crops and that the RFS is detrimental to the US and Guatemala.

When buying groceries, sticking to your budget is a helpful way to save money. But in Guatemala, if you buy the minimum amount of food for a good, healthy meal, you could lose nearly three-quarters of your budget. That is the situation Guatemalan families face daily. Some families cope with this situation by limiting their consumption of food, shifting to unbalanced diets, and spending less on other services like their health care (Braun 5). As the prices change, the poor people have no chance of providing enough food to fend off malnutrition. But in a country with such fertile soil, it is surprising to see that many farmers do not provide for themselves. The problem comes back to the money. Many farmers do not produce for the country; they produce for the exports (Abbott). As the farmers must make ends meet, they just cannot get enough money by selling locally, so they end up exporting many of their crop varieties. To make matters worse, infrastructure in Guatemala is below the Latin American average and below the Latin American infrastructure requirement (Flamini). So farmers that do successfully produce on their farms, have to overcome the obstacle of getting their products to the market. The "infrastructure deficiencies are keeping the cost of basic goods high, suppressing competition" which is part of how food prices in Guatemala have rose to such high prices. The lack of infrastructure is also deterring regional integration and trade "as private companies have struggled to get their merchandise to borders, ports, and airports"; this situation is exacerbating the food situation in Guatemala (Flamini). Campesinos have to find different ways to cope with the prices; one way that campesinos are resorting to is more "organic" and traditional methods of farming. By going back their roots, the farmers learn to become more independent instead having to rely on money the exports they sell. An example of this is fertilizers. In Guatemalan agro-science classes, they are told to use fertilizer, but campesinos are advised to steer away as the fertilizer is supporting the multinational companies (Abbott). The fertilizer further ties the farmer to the multinational companies instead of helping them bring back their "organic" methods (Abbott).

Solutions

The phrase "human rights" immediately brings to mind gender and cultural discrimination. But there is a side to human rights that is not always actively observed. The World Food Prize Institute labels human rights as "Addressing ... economic discrimination and improving access to credit and securing property rights for the poor and marginalized." In Guatemala, where the poor campesinos struggle to keep their land, this violation of human rights is obvious.

TIAA and REPSA have both been major players in the unfair seizing of Guatemalan land. But, both TIAA and REPSA have had campaigns against some of their practices. TIAA, which also invests in farmland in the US, has caused small and mid-sized farms many problems. The reason it does so is that the government does not regulate the amount of land the corporations purchase. By placing new restrictions on the land a corporation purchases, both the U.S and Guatemala would benefit from the new restrictions as the corporations would have less power. Also, making TIAA accountable for its farmland is another important step. Putting a third-party in charge to oversee TIAA's practices would help the campesinos to more fair treatment. The third-party would be able to take complaints from both sides and find a way to mediate between TIAA and the campesinos. Jeff Conant of Friends of the Earth states, "We're giving TIAA an opportunity to take the lead in the field worldwide on land grabs and

environmental destruction, pressure from their pension fund holders is part of convincing them to step up” (Farthing). Meanwhile, REPSA has already had some changes to its ways. In September of 2015, an environmental judge stopped REPSA’s operation for six months for an investigation of the catastrophe in the river that occurred earlier in 2015. Although, violence brought on by REPSA activists forced the court ruling to end early. In November 2015, REPSA’S customer, Cargill, pledged to terminate its contract with REPSA if the issues remain unsolved. Cargill also required that REPSA implement a transparent action plan to meet Cargill’s standards. This plan requires REPSA to take several actions such as issuing a strong zero tolerance policy on violence, engaging local communities and civil groups, adhering to local and national laws, and most importantly, strengthening environmental and social protections (“REPSA and Cargill’s Commitment to Sustainable Palm Oil”). Social protection, which is one of the items requested by Cargill, includes proper human and labor rights that REPSA is not giving to the campesinos.

America’s renewable fuel standard mandate states that each year, an increasing amount of biofuel will be blended into the nation’s fuel supply. But, The World Bank suggests that biofuel mandates should be adjusted when food is short or high priced in other countries (Rosenthal). America is going to have to lower its fuel standard so the Guatemalan people will have something to eat. Europe, which is also involved in the production of biofuel, has amended its policy so that it will reach only half its goal, so plots used for biofuel crops can be used for producing human food. While America may have caused the problem, the nation can still resolve it. The mandate, which was set up by Congress in 2007, can be waived by the Environmental Protection Agency. But instead of removing the RFS, an amendment to its goals would be more suitable. America currently has volume-based targets on its goal for biofuel, but a percentage based goal would make more sense. 10% would be the ideal number since most cars can take E10 gasoline and there wouldn’t be a need to worry about the corrosivity of the ethanol. Subsidized American corn has caused problems in not only Guatemala, but also other Central American countries. Together, the several countries could convince American Policymakers to change the policy seeing it is also negatively affecting the United States. While a change in foreign policies would be helpful, in the long run, they may not make a difference. If the standards are lowered but Guatemalan land is not given back to the campesinos, the campesinos will not be able to keep up in the future. More of the land that was devoted to biofuel crop production must be given back to the campesinos. Land that was taken in illegal methods should be the first land to be given back to recompense the attacked families. Local, state, and federal government in Guatemala will be key to aiding the campesinos regain lost land. If prices of staple food are rising, the national government could step in and make the biofuel farms switch their crops. State government could help monitor if the biofuel companies are unfairly taking land. Local government could then support local farmers with their production and farming. Both foreign policy changes and Guatemalan government will be key so that campesinos will have enough food to eat and land to grow on.

With food becoming extremely expensive in Guatemala, families just cannot buy the food they need to be healthy. Large corporations and biofuel companies taking the land from the poor has caused prices of food in Guatemala to rise very high. Just three years ago, one quetzal — about 15 cents — bought eight tortillas; today it buys only four (Rosenthal). Most families make difficult decisions on what they are going to spend their money on. What families need to start doing is becoming more self-sufficient. Back in 2013, Oswaldo Mauritius, a Guatemalan farmer, did just that. He began an operation with several other youths growing pineapples to sell in the community. His goal was to improve the local food security. In two years, he was successful going from 5,000 pineapples to 35,000 (Abbott). It doesn’t stop at pineapples. Guatemalan women have sold chocolate bars, and the youth in Mauritius’ program have included honey and several other crops that are easily sold in the market (Abbott). Increasing the participation and self-sufficiency in local, Guatemalan markets will see a decrease in the process of their food. As well as becoming more self-sufficient, campesinos should learn to be more productive with the little they have. By applying more advanced methods of agriculture, farmers in Guatemala, like the U.S, can have greater yields through proper management of their land. MásRiego (More Irrigation), a project

funded by the U.S, plans to send an international team of representatives from various universities to teach Guatemalan farmers about increasing the production through the use of rainwater harvesting, drip irrigation, mulch use, reduced tillage, and crop rotation (AZoCleantech). This program is going to mainly focus on the women and youth of Guatemala. The project team will work with local school and youth programs to teach students about better understanding the importance of water management practices. Women who have already participated in the program have used the program for a decrease in labor when preparing vegetable beds, controlling weeds, and manual watering. By teaching the farmers to be more independent and productive, over time they will gain a surplus of food as their new methods begin to produce. The surplus of food could be incorporated back into their markets, slowly decreasing the prices. To further decrease the prices, and make food more available to the people in rural areas, it is vital that Guatemala increases the percentage of GDP that it invests into its infrastructure. The International Monetary Fund states “a sustained 1 percent of GDP increase in public investment would ... raise [GDP] output by 1.2 percent and lower extreme poverty from 23 to 18 percent of the population”, although this will only be effective if the investment is strategically placed where it will be the most efficient. Guatemalan farmers have little land, selling in their own markets is difficult, but an increase in both local and federal participation can help change food prices for the better in Guatemala.

Conclusion

All humans deserve the right to own land, may it be to produce for their families or to sell to local markets. In previous years, Guatemalan farmers have had their rights violated by larger corporations. The palm-growing operations and biofuel mandates have taken land away from the campesinos, which has caused major problems for their local producers. Many families cannot afford or grow the food their families' need. But Guatemala still can come back from its struggles. Campesinos must join forces with their governmental and environmental agencies to support their fight against the palm oil companies. Also, more of REPSA's customers must require new standards on how REPSA cares and controls its land. Guatemala will have to make major changes to its own government if it wants to solve the problem caused by U.S corn and biofuel policy. But Guatemalan government will also need to challenge the U.S. on how it is dealing with its renewable fuel standard. On a smaller scale, the local producers need to become more self-sufficient and productive as changes in their markets may take a while as their larger problems are resolved. Increasing their production on less ground can also help the campesinos while they wait on the government to bring back more land crops. Campesinos still have a chance to take a stand in their treatment, and they all want their farmland back. Guatemala is one of the many countries struggling with human rights, but while other countries may struggle with gender and cultural differences, Guatemala struggles with giving proper property rights to the poor. Guatemalan farmers may have their property and economic rights broken by land-hungry corporations, foreign biofuel policies, and high market prices, nonetheless, the country still has a chance to climb out of its economic nadir by having more customers of large corporations to ask large corporations to regulate their land, change U.S corn biofuel policy alongside giving back biofuel production land to campesinos, and increasing the livelihood of local markets.

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