CHC SPECIAL REPORT

Guatemala Country Policy Study

By Margaret Zeigler and Grace Jones, with photos by Elizabeth Whelan

In March, 2009, the Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows traveled to Guatemala for a Country Policy Study (CPS) to learn firsthand from Guatemalan government officials and policymakers, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations about food security and prospects for development. Guatemala is a country emerging from decades of civil war and human rights massacres, and now faces new threats from drug trafficking, a drop in remittances due to economic recession in the United States, and rising prices of their staple food crop, maize. Since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, the government of Guatemala has made efforts to create programs and policies to fight hunger throughout the countryside; yet food security and good nutrition remain elusive goals for the Guatemalan people.

The U.S. government has supported efforts of the Guatemalans to begin to address their food insecurity and malnutrition, but much more engagement and support is needed to compete with decades of poverty, neglect of rural indigenous people, corruption, and emerging threats from organized drug cartels and criminal gangs. Coordinated and enhanced support is critical as the people of Guatemala strive to end hunger and poverty and improve the future of their children and their nation.

San Pedro Limon, Guatemala

Brief History

Beginning in the late 1950's, the country of Guatemala embarked on a 36 year civil war between the military government, leftist rebels, and right-wing militias resulting in the deaths of over 200,000 citizens. During this civil war, the U.S. backed a coup that overthrew the popular President, Jacob Arbenz, in 1954 and provided military assistance through the 1970's. A peace agreement between military and non-military rebels was finally signed in December, 1996. But after 36 years of civil war, the country faced deeper inequalities between the vast majority of the indigenous Maya population in the rural areas, and the descendents of the Spanish and European settlers in the mainly urban areas of the country.

In December, 2003, Oscar Berger was elected president and beginning in 2004 under the leadership of Andres Botran, the first Secretary for Food Security and Nutrition (SESAN), the government commenced the first serious effort to address hunger and poverty on a national scale. Álvaro Colom became President of Guatemala in a national election on November 4, 2007. Both the Berger and Colom governments have made commitments to establish polices

Santa Cruz Verapaz, Guatemala

and programs to address hunger and malnutrition in Guatemala, but much more work remains ahead for the people and government of Guatemala.

Overview

In March 2009, the 4th class of Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows spent ten days in Guatemala on a Country Policy Study (CPS). Leland fellows participate in a Country Policy Study to augment their learning during the policy year of the program. During this year, fellows are exposed to policy through: (1) their direct work with their host organizations in the U.S. or abroad, (2) participation in policy forums that take place in Washington, DC or other countries, (3) participation in Leland Program organized Professional Development Days that address emerging policy issues and (4) the Country Policy Study.

The CPS allows Fellows to network with various organizations, see their work and understand how policy affects development practice. U.S., European, UN, regional or national policies play a large role in determining the implementation and delivery of anti-hunger and development programs. Donor priorities, geopolitical strategic interests as well as national level priorities, national history, country geography and regional, national and community-level politics intermingle to make each developing country context unique. The CPS provides the opportunity for Leland Fellows to see how this mix affects development practice and engage with relevant stakeholders through a lens that is made up of direct field and policy experience. The CPS provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast their prior field work in another country as well as understand how their current policy work might assist in the CPS setting, in this case, Guatemala.

Through briefings and site visits, the Leland Fellows explored the challenges the country faces in meeting the needs of its poor and hungry in a post-conflict era. In particular, the CPS focused on initiatives related to maternal health and child nutrition, sustainable agriculture, environmental protection, and human rights. Fellows met with representatives from the Government of Guatemala, bilateral aid agencies, UN organizations, and private sector and local civil society organizations to learn about different program and policy approaches to reducing poverty and fighting hunger in Guatemala. Through their program visits and conversations with senior leaders in government ministries and with UN and non-governmental organization leaders, Leland Fellows delved more deeply into the complex challenges facing the country in the post-civil war era in Guatemala.

A Mayan weaver and member of a women's cooperative outside Antigua

Guatemala's Nutrition Crisis

Nutritional measures reveal that rural Guatemalan children have the highest rate of stunting (low height for age) in the Western Hemisphere with 49 percent of children under the age of five chronically malnourished.[1] In some rural areas, chronic malnutrition and stunting reach 70 to 80 percent of children under five. The CPS provided Leland Fellows with an opportunity

1 USAID Statistics, www.usaid.gov

A mother feeds her young son a fortified porridge made from Vitacereal at a WFP nutrition demonstration in Santa Cruz Verapaz

to learn about why Guatemala has such high rates of chronic malnutrition, and what policies and programs are being implemented to address this nutrition crisis.

Wayne R. Nilsestuen, USAID Mission Director, **Rose T. Rakas**, Deputy USAID Mission Director, and **Julia Maria Asturias**, Food Security Program Officer, provided the Fellows with a comprehensive history and overview of the political, economic, and nutrition situation of Guatemala. The briefing, held at the USAID Mission in Guatemala City, provided an excellent context for the meetings and site visits throughout the country during the next 10 days.

High malnutrition rates in Guatemala stem from poverty, lack of nutritional knowledge by mothers, and changes in consumption patterns, such as eating foods that are highly processed. For various reasons, such as convenience, many young mothers feed their young children meals of packaged corn chips and soft drinks rather than traditional healthier foods such as rice and beans and fruit. USAID Mission staff shared with Fellows their key strategic initiatives for Guatemala and their programs to promote breastfeeding up through six months of age and to promote nutritious weaning foods and nutrition education. Helping mothers understand basic nutrition and providing them incentives to use fortified foods and better weaning practices will reduce the high levels of child malnutrition, if applied consistently during the first years of childhood.

Leland Fellows also had the privilege of meeting with **Andres Botran**, Guatemala's first Secretary of Food Security and Nutrition (SESAN), a cabinet level position established by President Oscar Berger in 2004. In 2002, Botran learned that 50 to 70 percent of the children in his country were chronically malnourished, and he saw an opportunity to make a difference in this terrible situation when he was offered a senior post in the Berger government. He specifically requested that the President establish a Secretariat for Food Security and Nutrition, and the position and office are now codified in permanent law in Guatemala. In 2004, Botran was named the Secretary of this office, and he worked closely with all the relevant United Nations agencies in Guatemala (UNICEF, World Food Program, Food and Agriculture Organization,

Leland Fellows and Andres Botran (center), Guatemala's first Secretary of Food Security and Nutrition

A mother demonstrates to Leland Fellows how she prepares Vitacereal porridge at home for her young daughter

UN Development Program, and the World Health Organization) to conduct a major countrywide assessment of malnutrition and food insecurity. The resulting plan provided him with specific policies and programs in order to begin addressing widespread child malnutrition in Guatemala.

Leland Fellows also met with the current Secretary of Food Security and Nutrition, **Dr. Juan Aguilar**. Appointed by President Colom in 2007, Aguilar has continued to build on the prior foundation established by Andres Botran and is implementing and expanding a special program established in the Berger Administration that targets the most vulnerable malnourished children. This program distributes a fortified weaning food, VitaCereal, to pregnant women and children between six months and three years of age in high priority rural areas. VitaCereal is a blend of soy and maize and micronutrients and takes into account local Guatemalan diet preferences. It was developed by Guatemalan nutritionists and staff from the UN World Food Program (WFP) and is packaged and distributed in a targeted manner. Mothers are given training in how to prepare and administer the mix to their children in order to prevent chronic malnutrition.

WFP assists the government of Guatemala and the Ministry of Health with VitaCereal program training and support. WFP staff coordinated visits for the Leland Fellows to homes and health centers in rural villages near Coban, Guatemala, where they could interact with VitaCereal program participants. Leland Fellows were able to ask questions of mothers and children and learned about the challenges of establishing and implementing this promising program. An estimated 120,000 children and 40,000 pregnant and breastfeeding mothers currently receive VitaCereal. This program needs rapid and massive expansion to reach millions more who are suffering from malnutrition.

Sustainable Agriculture

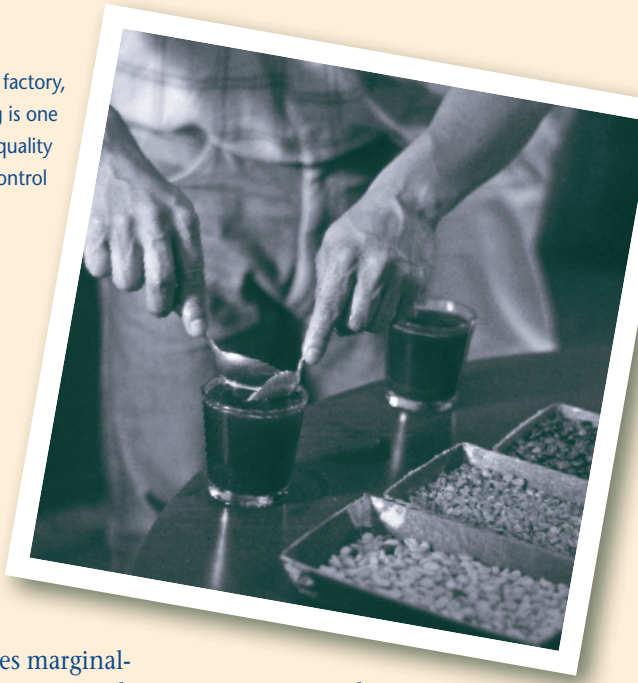
In addition to learning about malnutrition and targeted programs to prevent child stunting, Leland Fellows observed how Guatemalans are harnessing sustainable agriculture to create jobs and increase their income levels to reduce poverty. Agriculture contributes about 23 percent to the gross domestic product, and employs about 50 percent of the labor force. The principal cash crops are coffee, sugar, bananas, and cotton. Nontraditional agricultural exports have greatly increased in recent years, and include melon, papaya, mango, pineapple, cardamom, garlic, spices and nuts, and ornamental plants. One of the strategies of the government to expand jobs is to diversify away from maize, beans and coffee production and to focus on higher value crops that can be exported or purchased for the Guatemala City urban area. USAID and the government of Guatemala are working together to help farmers diversify from corn/maize and bananas and coffee into higher value crops in order to improve incomes and to connect poor farmers to better market opportunities.

As part of an effort to improve agriculture practices and increase maize yields, WFP has implemented a

Chichicastenango Market

A WFP staff member provides the Fellows with an overview of San Pedro Limon's P4P program

Representatives from PRODEVER explain cardamom production



At APODIP's factory, coffee tasting is one means of quality control

program in Guatemala called Purchase for Progress (P4P) which provides technical support and training to smallholder farmers in rural areas. The maize will then be purchased and used as an input for the aforementioned VitaCereal program. P4P allows farmers to reduce their risks and have a guaranteed market source for surplus crops as well as opportunities for additional local food processing to create jobs. Leland Fellows had an opportunity to visit with WFP staff and farmers in the village of San Pedro Limon about the new P4P program. The program is sponsored in Guatemala by the **Howard G. Buffett Foundation**.

Leland Fellows also visited with **Sal Brizuela** and other technical staff of ForesTrade, Inc. based in the town of Cobán in the region of Alta Verapaz. ForesTrade is an international trading company that specializes in the production and commercialization of organic spices and organic and fair trade coffee. ForesTrade works in production partnerships for certified organic cardamom, allspice, ramon nut, vanilla, and coffee with predominantly indigenous Mayan communities in Guatemala. Leland Fellows learned about how ForesTrade incorporates marginalized farmers into producer cooperatives to improve their coffee quality and to achieve certification for organic coffee so the farmers can receive a premium price. Prior to their cooperation with ForesTrade the farmers were forced to sell their products to local middle-men at rates far below the regular market price.

APODIP, one of several cooperatives that has organized since working with ForesTrade, has been so successful that they "graduated" from ForesTrade's program and now operate independently as a private entity. Leland Fellows met with **Marvin Lopez** of APODIP to learn more about their history and current coffee production operations at the local Coban coffee processing plant. ForesTrade's sustainable model of supporting cooperatives and improving farmer capacities has, in a relatively short time, resulted in APODIP's success.

Ecotourism and Protecting the Natural Environment

The historical Mayan temples and ancient sites in Guatemala generate a significant number of jobs in the tourism industry. In addition, forests, lakes, beaches and other natural attractions draw tens of thousands of ecotourists from many parts of the world. Guatemala is among the world's top 25 biodiversity "hot spots" but is threatened by degradation and deforestation. During the CPS, Leland Fellows visited several projects that centered upon preserving natural assets as well as historic archaeological sites that generate jobs for rural Guatemalans.

Farmer in Sierra De Las Minas, Guatemala where Defensores de la Naturaleza works with local community members

Defensores de la Naturaleza (Defenders of Nature) is a foundation devoted to the preservation and sustainable management of Guatemala's natural heritage. Through research, natural resource conservation, environmental education and political advocacy, Defensores is protecting the natural resource base of Guatemala and helping provide sustainable jobs for those who live in sensitive ecological zones. **Carmen Herold**, a program coordinator for Defensores de la Naturaleza guided the Leland Fellows on a special visit to the Biosphere Reserve, Sierra de las Minas project. The Sierra is a mountain range in central Guatemala with a vast range of forest types, and is recognized by the United Nations as a special "Man and Biosphere" program.

The Sierra also contains the habitat for the rare Quetzal, Guatemala's national bird and 885 other species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Over 180,000 people live in the Reserve in some 200 communities. Leland Fellows interacted with a community inside the Reserve and learned about how their forest conservation practices were preserving important natural resources as well as generating sustainable income. Carmen also briefed the Fellows on other important projects of Defensores, particularly the new National Botanical Garden that conserves representative samples of Guatemala's flora for future economic and cultural uses.

Leland Fellows learned about several tourism projects during the CPS. Near the village of Cahabon outside

A local dish, Kak Ik, being served to the Fellows at a restaurant in Cahabon, where PRODEVER works to promote sustainable tourism

Coban, a local Guatemalan development organization, PRODEVER has partnered with the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to help villages create new jobs catering to those visiting the beautiful limestone caves and rivers. By providing grants and financing, IFAD has enabled PRODEVER and local communities to build roads, create simple tourist hostels and restaurants and establish rafting and caving operations to employ local Mayans who have lost jobs in the agriculture sector. **Roy Wilhen Fraatz Lopez** of PRODEVER explained the benefits to the local populations of learning to provide tourism services to visitors from North America, other countries in Latin America, and Europe which can diversify incomes thereby alleviating the need to rely solely on maize or cardamom production.

Leland Fellows had an opportunity to visit the highly unusual Caves of Candelaria Camposanto, some of the most mysterious and beautiful caves in Guatemala, and were treated to a special tour led by Mayan women who had been trained by the staff of Counterpart International (an international relief and development

Leland Fellows with Louis Enrique Monterroso and COPREDEH staff, including Lorena Pereira

organization.). The caves were created by streams running through limestone plateaus over millions of years and now provide an economic opportunity for local Maya to work as guides to earn money which provides additional food and educational opportunities for their children. **Gonzalo Latz**, a tourism field technician with Counterpart, provided an excellent overview of the sustainable tourism opportunities in Guatemala that are providing new means of community development.

Latz also hosted the Fellows on a special visit to a recently discovered archaeological site in Cancuen, a remote area where **Dr. Arthur Demarest**, a Vanderbilt University professor and archaeologist, has led excavations of Mayan ruins. Demarest coined the phrase 'ethical archaeology' and developed a program of combined archaeological restoration and tourism. Fellows learned about the Cancuen Mayan ruins and were guided by local Mayans who are earning degrees in archaeology and tourism.

Human Rights and Food Security in Guatemala

Due to their experiences with violence and deprivation during 36 years of civil war, Guatemalans have begun to claim their basic human rights to freedom of speech and political association and are demanding justice for many of the crimes committed by former political and military leaders. COPREDEH (Presidential Commission for Human Rights) is a commission that provides a human rights focus within the government and coordinates action to address political and economic rights in Guatemala. The Leland Fellows spent an afternoon at COPREDEH's headquarters in Guatemala City and met with **Lorena Pereira**, the executive director, and staff to learn about how human rights efforts are expanding from traditional political rights to economic, cultural, and social rights, especially for food security in Guatemala.

Luis Enrique Monterroso, a right to food expert and activist, provided a spirited briefing on the history of right to food efforts in Guatemala from 1974 through 2008. The government established a special right to food law in 2005/2006 (National System of Food Security and Nutrition, or SINASAN) and recognizes its obligations as a government to protect people from malnutrition and hunger. A number of commissions and committees to address food security and nutrition have been formed in the past, but the impact, until recently, has been minimal because the actions remain technical and only provide surplus food for populations in urban areas. The extreme malnutrition of indigenous Mayans living in remote rural areas has not changed.

The lack of government services to remote rural areas is due to a lack of political will and lack of accountability. It is also a result of an attitude of exclusion by urban, more educated Guatemalans against

The Fellows visit excavations of Mayan ruins in Cancuen, Guatemala

rural Mayans, particularly with respect to land ownership. In order to change these attitudes in the future generation and raise awareness about food insecurity and people's basic human right to food, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other civil society organizations are supporting a dynamic program, "Una Manana Con Vos/z." The program (A Morning With You/With Voice) matches Guatemalan youth with rural Mayan people where they spend 3 days and 2 nights in their homes and experience extreme poverty and deprivation as part of a life changing service program. A new cadre of young anti-hunger leaders are joining in partnership to broaden the political will to end hunger in Guatemala and to hold government and civil society accountable for conditions that create hunger and malnutrition. With more awareness and commitment, laws and programs can be established that will provide equal opportunity and support for the 80 percent of Guatemalan people who are outside the system.

In Sierra De Las Minas, Defensores de La Naturaleza works with community members, such as these artisans, to create sustainable jobs for those who live in sensitive ecological zones

Prospects for the Future

Throughout the CPS, Leland Fellows were moved and challenged by the spirit of the Guatemalan people and the genuine efforts on the part of many government leaders and civil society organizations to make a dent in hunger and poverty. As crime and drug trafficking increase in Guatemala, the prospects for creating an environment conducive to economic growth and extension of government social safety net programs become more fragile. The U.S. government, via the USAID, non-governmental organizations and other civil society organizations, should increase partnerships and investments in Guatemala in a demonstration of solidarity with the indigenous people who have been marginalized for generations.

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