

Guatemalan Youth Case Study

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Situational Overview

Many argue that as a result of a 36 year-long civil war that ended in 1996 with 200,000 casualties, Guatemalan society has become passive and disengaged. Years of repression and persecution, and mistrust took the toll on a country's youth in particular, who now self-identify as apathetic. Since April 2015, however, thousands of Guatemalans have taken the streets to demonstrate peacefully against the corruption scandals involving Government Officials and the private sector in an elaborated customs fraud. The uprising evolved quickly and backed-up a renewed country judiciary system and academic institutions. In an unprecedented development of events and after five months of protests and peaceful demonstrations, the President and Vice-president and several high-level Government Officials were indicted. Almost all are in prison now, awaiting a hearing to determine the date of the trial and their fate. Guatemalan society, in this instance was far from passive and disengaged.

Professional associations' and youth participation and engagement is the cornerstone of this transition. The collective commitment to finding compromises among political ideologies, bridging ethnic and socio-economic groups together, and breaking down cultural divides, was instrumental to raise the voice against endemic corruption and impunity of elected officials; strong engagement from a variety of civil society groups is becoming ever more important for reform of State structures in the transparency, judiciary, legislative, and political arenas.

Country Context

With a population of 15 million people, Guatemala is the largest country in Central America. It a small, heterogeneous country (25 languages are spoken within its borders) and has some of the lowest human development indicators¹; namely, the highest level of chronic malnutrition (49.8%) in the hemisphere for children less than five years of age.

With a Gross Domestic Product –GDP- of \$58 billion (World Bank, 2014), Guatemala is classified as a lower middle-income country. The GDP per capita of \$3,477 is deceptive because the benefits of its economic strength are limited to the urban, non-indigenous population. Guatemala has the 11th highest income inequality (Gini) worldwide. Agriculture remains the primary source of rural incomes. Recent and considerable changes in age and socio-demographics now characterize **Guatemala as a 'youth bulge' nation -- where almost 70% of the population is under the age of 30, and almost 60% of these youth are poor².**

In education, Guatemala has almost reached universal coverage of primary school enrollment. However, there are still few children in pre-primary school (46.3%), lower secondary school (45%) and upper secondary school (24%)³. The failure rate (drop out and repetition combined) in first grade has decreased by almost 25% in the past four years. Still, 27.2% of first graders were not promoted (retained) to second grade in 2014. Advances in sixth grade completion have been minimal due to lack of access, especially in remote rural areas, generalized high dropout, and the inability of the GOG to ensure opportunities to learn in all schools. The large drop-out rate is associated with the need for

¹“International Human Development Indicators: Guatemala,” United Nations Development Program, 2014.

² National Institute of Statistics (2012, INE, Spanish acronym)

³ Net Enrollment Rates Ministry of Education, Information system, 2014

many children to contribute labor to their families' livelihoods. Even when children do stay in school in the primary grades, they often struggle to gain proficiency in early grade reading skills (mother tongue acquisition), thus hindering future educational performance. Low levels of internal efficiency result in a labor force that is ill prepared to compete in an increasingly global market.

Youth in rural areas

Fifty-four percent of the total population lives in poverty (World Bank, 2014) and there is significant overlap between those who are poor and the 40% of Guatemalans who are indigenous. The inequality that exists between indigenous and non-indigenous populations is further reflected in limited access to health and educational services, employment, and markets. The higher levels of poverty, poorer health and nutritional status, and lower levels of education among indigenous populations compared to non-indigenous populations further complicates demographic challenges in a 'youth bulge' nation.

There are 1.7 million out-of-school youth –OSY—nation-wide aged 15-24, the vast majority without primary education certification and a limited skillset to enter the labor force. More than 660,000 OSY live in the Western Highlands (and the priority geographical area of USAID). On average, 20% of these youth became parents before turning 16 years old, and half of 19-24 year old women are married. In rural areas, economic problems and marriage are the two main education barriers reported after dropping out.

Several local and private-funded programs offer a solution, albeit partial, to provide access to relevant training opportunities for youth. These tracks enroll a significant segment of the secondary level population, although still a minority of youth considering the breadth of the out-of-school population. Upper secondary and professional training also have a large number of diversified curricular areas that do not respond to labor market demands, a condition which has contributed to creating false expectations among enrollees and their families about potential job prospects and the quality of education received. Given youth demographics, Guatemala needs to generate employment opportunities for at least 222,000 youth per year for incorporation into the labor market. Small-scale GOG efforts do not ensure the acquisition of relevant skills, nor provide job-placement opportunities. Despite its importance, the role of the private sector has been absent in the design of these programs, thus impeding targeted education programs to support high-demand economic sectors. In most of these vocational education programs there is a clear disconnect between the education supply and productive sectors' demands. This phenomenon contributes to a growing population without relevant skills to enter the workforce and become productive citizens. Put bluntly, high opportunity costs contribute to a rather apathetic and hopeless sentiment in rural youth. Economic problems, early marriage, and limited opportunities for civic participation, are the main barriers to accessing education reported by OSY. Almost 75% of all OSY do not have plans to return to study given the lack of pertinent and relevant education programs that can ensure higher income generation. As a result, a third of all OSY report having friends who migrated to another country⁴.

The latter is the only solution for most youth unable to ensure their wellbeing and that of their family. As a result of inadequate education and a lack of job opportunities, youth are vulnerable to the lure of organized crime groups. A significant portion of OSY chooses to migrate to urban centers and Guatemala City's peri-urban informal human settlements; others choose to migrate directly to the United States of America. Less attention by the development community has been given to the

⁴ Participatory Youth Assessment, USAID/Guatemala 2014

migration from rural areas to urban centers, and the victimization of new urban inhabitants as the result of crime-related violence. The harsh and violent context in urban settings might be prompting a second wave of migration to another country.

Violence

Crime levels, narco-activity, and gang activity are most intense in urban and peri-urban areas of Guatemala, yet rural Guatemala is by no means violence-free. Several studies⁵ correlate the ‘youth bulge’ as a contributing demographic factor to increased violence. Moreover, several vulnerabilities directly limit youth potential: gender-based violence, intra-family violence, trafficking in persons, narco-activity, unhealthy lifestyles, adolescent pregnancies, early marriage, stigmatization due to sexual orientation and gender identity, lack of inclusive services for persons with special needs, and the lack of appropriate civic participation spaces. Collectively, these compounding demographic issues exclude youth from social mobility opportunities.

Youth in Guatemala are particularly vulnerable not only to poverty, but also to violence, as Guatemala has one of the highest rates of homicides in the world (31.2 per 100,000 persons, down from 41 per 100,000 in 2010⁶). Victims and perpetrators of armed violence and homicides are mainly male youth, between 18 and 39 years old. Similarly, young women are most affected by rising femicide, and other forms of violence, including rape, domestic, and intra-familial violence. In 2011, an estimated 8,000-10,000 youth were involved in crime, gangs, drug trafficking, and dealing of illicit narcotics. Guatemala is among the most dangerous countries in the world due to a confluence of organized crime and trafficking of persons, narcotics, and arms. This situation represents one of the most serious regional threats to stability since the armed conflict. There has been an increase in regionally powerful youth gangs who engage in armed robbery, murder-for-hire and elaborate extortion schemes.

Even though the murder rate has consistently decreased since 2009, it remains high. Guatemala continues to suffer from corruption, impunity, inefficiency and infiltration of illicit actors in justice and security institutions. Crime and violence are now recognized as serious economic and social problems with very high economic and social costs, especially in poor urban areas.

Guatemala City has the highest incidence of homicide violence in the country (53.7 per 100,000 persons). Almost one third of homicides take place in the Capital, specifically in “red zones” where there is no law-enforcement agencies presence, nor has there been Government control for more than a decade. These areas are controlled by violent gangs in the outskirts of the Capital, and informal human settlements with scarce access to basic services. A significant portion of all residents in these areas are migrants coming from rural areas, the majority have income generation activities in the informal economy. In contrast, the origin rural departments in the Western Highlands have homicide rates below 7 per 100,000 persons⁷. Gangs are responsible for most extortion schemes in the Capital City. A total of 14 out of Guatemala’s 34 professional and economic associations have reported extortion attempts against their employees⁸. Just in the transportation sector, there is an estimate of yearly earnings of US\$1.4 million from extortion activities⁹.

⁵ *Informe sobre violencia homicida en Guatemala durante año 2014*, Carlos Mendoza, CABI, Febrero 2015

⁶ Policía Nacional Civil, Julio 2015. According to INACIF, homicide rate is 36.6 per 100,000 persons

⁷ *Informe de Violencia Homicida en Guatemala*. Carlos Mendoza. CABI. 2014

⁸ *Guate-Mara: the Extortion Economy in Guatemala*. By Quentin Delpech. Latin America Goes Global, 2013.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Migration

In summer 2014, US Congressional concerns regarding Unaccompanied Child –UAC- migrating to the United States made front-page headlines. More than 60,000 Central American UAC have been detained at the US South border and are currently in custody of US immigration officials to begin the deportation process. The highest incidence of out-migration is from Guatemala City (19.4%), followed by departments in the Western Highlands. The average Guatemalan unaccompanied child migrant is from a rural, indigenous area, and between the ages of 14-17 (of which 83% are boys). Guatemala's migration is fueled by the economic situation mainly. However, a second factor is the violence registered in urban areas in particular.

Guatemala exhibits a number of harsh realities high levels of violence; social, cultural and historical divides between ethnic, economic, and geographic groups; and limited public resources to address such issues. As a result of globalization Guatemalans have seen what the modern world has to offer, have developed an idea of what they need and want in order to live in it, and a large number have concluded that Guatemala cannot provide what they seek¹⁰. Hence, lacking a sense of inclusion, Guatemalans are migrating to other countries, leading to the disintegration of families and social structures within Guatemala. The main “push factors” of this phenomenon are: lack of opportunities, domestic violence, social violence (gangs, organized crime, extortions, pressure on youth to join gangs in urban areas), coupled with “pull factors” of family reunification, aided by social media. At least three-quarters of all inhabitants of migrant areas in the Central American Northern Triangle believe their U.S.-based compatriots live better than they do in their home country.

To mitigate migration, USAID is articulating efforts with other donors, and the Governments of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in *The Alliance for Prosperity Plan*. This is a strategy to provide a response to OSY seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families.

Intervention

A combined intervention in the Western Highlands of the country is creating relevant opportunities for youth. As almost a third of Guatemalan children are failing first grade, interventions in early grade reading in bilingual contexts (Mayan languages and Spanish) reduce drop-out and repetition in following grades. Low coverage rates in secondary education are a product of severe quality challenges in primary education, as opposed to a coverage challenge in secondary per se.

USAID is also providing opportunities for OSY in selected rural areas as one way of preventing rural to urban migration and the likelihood of youth engaging in crime or other illicit activities, building workforce skills and increasing access to sustainable livelihood pathways. If Guatemalan youth receive relevant education, economic and civic participation opportunities (defined by jobs, participation in the community, and enrollment in further education), this will enable them to contribute positively and productively to society. Target beneficiaries are female and male youth, ages 15-24, in the historically underserved and excluded populations in the rural areas of Guatemala's Western Highlands. Education options are being tailored to different pathways, local social capital, and labor market assessments. The provision of education and workforce opportunities for youth is a preventive measure in order to contribute to a conflict and violence-free environment.

¹⁰ What people need and want to live in the modern world includes: (i) an income above the minimum needed to live (subjective and varies by location), (ii) liquid savings, (iii) basic life competencies and good financial management skills, and iv) a safe and stable environment.

In urban settings USAID is focusing in primary prevention of crime-related violence. The crime prevention approach attempts to address the root causes of crime, rather than deal with crime after it has become endemic. USAID is focusing its intervention in urban areas where crime and violence are prevalent. Primary prevention activities involve: a) Planning by municipal-level committees; b) Crime observatories and data collection; c) Crime prevention through environmental design (such as improved street lighting, graffiti removal, cleaned up public spaces); d) Programs for at-risk youth (such as outreach centers, workforce development, mentorships); and e) Community policing.

USAID conducted an impact evaluation of this model for primary prevention and interesting results showed that the approach had a positive impact in: a) Reduction in the expected level of crime victimization and violence; b) Significant increase in the expected level of citizens' sense of security; c) Significant decrease in the expected level of neighborhood disorder, such as loitering and gang presence; d) Satisfaction with police performance, and, e) Strengthening democratic values. The study also evidenced that schools have an important role to play in promoting a positive environment for learning. Teachers and MOE officials are key actors to uncover and prevent intra-familiar violence and sexual abuse by promoting counseling services and parents' schools.

Conclusions

1. USAID's interventions to provide opportunities for youth –through community-based crime prevention projects or in rural settings to increase income generation activities– are inherently cross-sectoral. That is, they integrate education and workforce development, economic growth and employment, public health, and governance interventions. This interrelation creates relevant programs that can mitigate some of the social challenges identified above.
2. The participation of youth in the development of these opportunities is the cornerstone of a sustainable process to increase youth's wellbeing. The demands of vulnerable youth that arise in a specific context need to be taken into consideration (as opposed to the employers' demands as a stand alone factor).
3. Contexts with vulnerable youth need to be explored with a fragility and stability lens. The Central American Northern Triangle stability could be jeopardized if State institutions do not respond with relevant alternatives for youth.
4. Structural changes need to follow the short-term provision of opportunities for youth. Interventions need to take advantage of Guatemalan youth's unprecedented engagement and leadership role to fight against impunity, corruption, and the overall lack of opportunities. There is a clear gap to be filled between short-term solutions and the strengthening of country's systems and institutions.
5. In the education sector, several questions remain unanswered, pending systematization of the political crisis. The systemic adjustments of the secondary education sector as the transition level, the facilitation of civic engagement opportunities, the revision of the curriculum, and the responses provided pedagogically to trauma, migration, and fragile environments are areas that need further analysis and concrete responses.