

Education In Action Delegation Report 2012

The sixth annual Education In Action (EIA) delegation to Guatemala in February was a resounding success story, continuing the tradition established by EIA founder, the late Roberto Miranda, with the first delegation in 2007.

EIA is a partnership between an Ottawa-based solidarity group and the Peasants Committee of the Highlands in Guatemala, known by its Spanish acronym, the CCDA. Each year, volunteers sell CCDA coffee and hold fundraisers to support various CCDA projects. A volunteer delegation then travels to a Guatemalan community to participate in a cultural exchange and to build homes with and for economically disadvantaged Guatemalan families. Funds raised through the sale of coffee in Canada are used to buy building supplies for the houses.



EIA delegation members at work site with CCDA workers and the Velasquez Akino family

This year, there were 9 Canadian participants in total, coming from a variety of provinces and territories, as well as diverse backgrounds. Some were in Guatemala for the first time, while others brought considerable experience with them. All were welcome and each brought some unique skills and personal contributions to the trip. It made for a great mix of people and we all enjoyed getting to know each other for the 2 weeks we were there.

For the 2012 Education In Action project, a total of \$31,600 was raised through coffee sales and other fund raising activities such as a community dinner and a silent auction. The bulk of the funds are being used to build 12 houses in rural indigenous communities for hard working families currently living in substandard conditions. As in past years, the funds will also pay for the salary of one teacher in the community of El Esfuerzo. This year, the CCDA has a new project to build an oven to bake roof tiles for the houses. Funds from the EIA project will also go towards the oven.

Our trip was a far cry from all work and no play. It was an excellent mixture of work days, where we were working with the Guatemalan families constructing the houses, and educational days, where we visited colourful highland markets, historical sites, other interesting Guatemalan social organizations, or met with people knowledgeable and experienced in the struggle for social justice in Guatemala. It was most definitely all a rich and powerful learning experience.

Recovery of Historical Memory

For example, the very first day, we met with Wendy Mendez of HIJOS, a youth organization working to preserve and restore the historical memory of what happened during the 36-year armed conflict that ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996.

HIJOS has an impressive record. Working mostly with visual arts such as murals or posters, street theatre, workshops and demonstrations, they have contributed to a new awareness among Guatemalans of their own history. They inspire Guatemalan youth to become agents of peaceful social change.

Wendy told us of some of the current legal cases against former military officers. Guatemala has brought the first genocide case against a general in all of Latin America. There are now genocide cases against 3 generals. Four generals are under house arrest. Hearing the personal stories that Wendy told us was both moving and informative, and gave us an invaluable insider's perspective into the post-war social justice movement in Guatemala.

A Brief History of Guatemala by Leocadio

We also had an awesome talk with Leocadio Juracan, the general coordinator of the CCDA. His main focus was on land ownership, the need for agrarian reform and rural development policies.

To begin, Leocadio gave us a brief history of the area around the municipality of San Lucas Toliman, where the CCDA headquarters are located in the village of Quixaya. One hundred years ago, he explained, all of the land in San Lucas was held communally.

Today, there are 14 large, privately held industrial farms or

fincas that hold 62% of the territory. The remaining 38%, through corruption, has been divided and dismembered 250 times, leaving 99% of the people with almost no access to land. With this little snapshot, we had a very good idea how the issue of land ownership became a central one in Guatemala.



EIA delegation visited Asociacion Maya, a women's weaving co-op producing fair trade goods for export



Delegation members meet with Leocadio Juracan

The Conquest was one period that stands out as particularly destructive. But there was another period in the 1800s, when the Guatemalan government promoted an influx of German immigration in order to bring “development” to the land. This was the beginning of Guatemala’s coffee export industry, but also represents a turning point in the loss of indigenous lands, leading to a situation where they were forced to sell their labour to large landowners and live in a state of virtual slavery.

The Church also played a very negative role in the colonization process. They attempted to stamp out the indigenous Mayan cosmivision, culture, language, traditions and families in ways that are similar to what happened to Canadian *indigenous* peoples, especially through the residential school system.

With only one exception, there was always a further concentration of land and resources to outsiders as indigenous people were enslaved. The one bright spot in the history of devastation was the revolutionary period from 1944-54.

From that period, Guatemalans have the IGSS, the state social security institute. It still exists today, only in a striped down form. Under IGSS, workers receive medical coverage in case of injury as well as 50% of their salary when they are unable to work. (see *CCDA Supports Labour Rights*).



CCDA often participates in demonstrations to pressure the government to prioritize issues such as rural development.

mega-projects that do not address the needs of the majority. There is a neo-liberal agenda of privatization. Investment is made in highways, mining, and hydro dams with very little benefit flowing to the people.

In addition to misplaced priorities of the government, Leocadio outlined other reasons for such high rates of poverty in a country so rich in resources. High on the list of factors that are responsible for high rates of poverty are corruption and tax evasion (see, *A Case Study in Government Corruption*, p.4).

Government infrastructure projects such as the new airport in Guatemala City are riddled with corruption and bribery. Contracts are handed out to those who make large political donations to the governing party. Costs are inflated and substandard materials are used that do not meet code.

CCDA Supports Labour Rights

Guatemala also has one of the best labour codes in Latin America. Unfortunately it lacks the institutional support to enforce the labour code. Furthermore, few workers are actually covered under the IGSS system and legal minimum wages are rarely paid. As a result, Guatemalan workers are badly exploited by landowners.

The CCDA helps workers involved in labour disputes. By way of example, Leocadio outlined one case where they represented 5 workers who were illegally dismissed. Normally these workers would have no recourse to resolve their case, but with CCDA support, each worker was offered Q2500 settlement by the landowner. CCDA then supported and accompanied the workers for 2 years until the case reached a labour tribunal. Each worker was awarded Q125,000 and this has been paid out to the workers. (US\$1 = 7.70 Quetzales) What a great success for the workers, and the CCDA.

Another case involved the Santa Teresa finca, foreign owned and just up the road from CCDA headquarters in Quixaya. Older people who lived all their lives on the finca were fired and evicted when the finca changed owners. In total 98 families were fired. After 9 months, the case was heard by a labour tribunal and the families were awarded a Q1.5 million settlement. While in most cases, landowners enjoy virtual impunity from prosecution, with the proper support from CCDA, these workers were able to find justice.

The CCDA supports the Peace Accords that brought an end to the 36-year internal conflict in 1996, but unfortunately the government has not implemented most of the Accords. The social conditions that created the war still exist today.

Government policies promote

Surviving on Minimum Wage or Less

Leocadio finished his presentation by returning to the plight of the peasant farmer, or *campesino*. The cost of a basic food basket for the average family is Q127 per day. Yet the minimum wage is only Q68 per day. The jobs available to many Guatemalans do not even pay minimum wage. Pay on the fincas is about Q40 (\$5.20) per day. The government and corporations use the current global crisis as a pretext for keeping salaries low, even though the Guatemalan economy has not been affected as the world's developed economies have.

We didn't need advanced math skills to see that the situation of *campesino* families is economically untenable. In fact, to drive home the point, we all did an exercise the following day in the market at San Lucas Toliman.

We split up into pairs and each pair was given Q20 to do the food shopping for an entire family. This was meant to represent the amount a typical rural family would have to spend on food for a day. We went from vendor to vendor in the market and soon found out how impossible a task it would be. We all had to imagine ourselves trying to feed an entire family on such a limited budget. It's no wonder that the staple food items are tortillas and beans, while items such as meat, fresh vegetables or fruit are considered luxuries that are seldom enjoyed by many.

In addition to the meetings and orientation exercises like the market visit above, we also spent a couple of hours at the CCDA coffee processing plant where they have several different kinds of projects underway, including an experimental mushroom project, a goat project, an organic fertilizer project, and where a training center is under construction. We also tried our hands at coffee picking, just to see how difficult it really is. After a couple of hours, we were all ready for a permanent break from that. We never weighed the collective fruits of our labour, but it's rather doubtful that any of us would have been hired as coffee pickers based on what we picked that morning.



Low wages result in poverty and substandard housing

A Case Study in Government Corruption

To illustrate his point about corruption, Leocadio told us of the new airport in Guatemala City. We had all been impressed with the modern terminal building when we arrived at the beginning of our trip. The cost of the new terminal was budgeted at \$90.9M, but cost overruns related to a corruption scandal that rocked the government in 2007 brought the cost to \$144M. Sadly, to cover the cash shortfall, \$24.8M was taken from the Department of Education budget. This money had been earmarked for a school nutritional snack program, teacher salaries and illiteracy programs. The money instead went into the pockets of people and companies with close ties to the government. A small percentage of Guatemalans will ever see the inside of the terminal, and meanwhile schools have no books, equipment or teachers. This example clearly indicates the priorities that the Guatemalan elites and their government have.

We discussed the point that the new airport does attract tourism and international business, but Leocadio explained that few of the benefits actually reach the man in the street. He told us of a conference that he participated in with representatives of the government and business. While there, he learned that Solola has the fourth highest income from tourism of the 22 departments in Guatemala, but it is also the third highest in poverty rates. This shows that while tourism may create some jobs, it does not have a strong impact on the economic well being of many people.

House Construction Begins

With all of the activities described thus far, it was Day 5 before we actually had a chance to do any house construction, and we were all ready and eager to go after a tasty breakfast prepared by some of the CCDA women. It was about a 90 minute drive from Quixaya where we were staying, up to Ojo de Agua, the small village where we would be building the houses. Our transportation was in the back of the CCDA truck, and we piled in with enthusiasm. The drive was an experience in itself. The winding road took us up through the mountains surrounding Lake Atitlan and the views at times were stunning.



EIA delegation members travel by pickup to the construction site

Rafael, the head of the family who would be living in the house when it was finished, was already hard at work when we arrived. The CCDA has been consulting with some Mexican architects and has modified their house design as a result. To reduce costs and use local materials as much as possible, the houses built this year were to be constructed with adobe blocks rather than the concrete blocks used in previous years. Rafael had been working for days on his own mixing the mud, putting it into the wooden forms and then drying the blocks in the sun.

Soon we were fast at work, leveling off the work site. Stakes were driven into the ground, plumb lines were strung, and the hard work of digging trenches for the foundations began. Over the next few days, the foundations progressed slowly but steadily. For us, it was an eye opening experience. While the design of the houses is quite simple, there is much work that goes into each one when the work is all done by hand.

We were a group of 9 Canadians, and there were, depending on the day, 3 or 4 CCDA workers that were accompanying us. All told, there were about 15 of us working on the project. And yet we only succeeded in constructing the foundations and beginning on the lower part of the walls on one house, plus the trenches of the foundations of another house were partially completed. The remainder of the work will be completed by CCDA workers and the families that are to benefit from the new homes.



Digging trenches for the house foundations



Wiring the rebar



Hauling rocks for the foundations of the house

The work was difficult but rewarding. We took breaks as needed. There were always a few children around, working with us, playing, or just watching. I wouldn't have believed that a single location could function simultaneously as a construction site and a playground, but we managed it, and there were no accidents or tears shed the whole time we were there.



Work and play: a good combination

The families at the work site were open and welcoming to us. We were all there working on a common project and the cultural barriers that usually exist between rural campesino families and foreigners quickly dropped and an atmosphere of trust prevailed. For this reason, it was a rich and rewarding experience for everyone.



Seemingly endless amounts of mud for blocks and cement for foundations needed to be mixed

During our stay in Quixaya, there were many times we were granted a unique glimpse into rural Guatemalan life. A young girl bringing a basket of corn to the corn mill for the family's morning tortillas; coffee pickers at the side of the road with sacks to coffee to be bought by "coyotes" who exploit market conditions to buy the coffee at bargain prices; families harvesting anise in the surrounding fields. Both the good and the bad were all part of the experiential package. The meetings with the CCDA and other organizations were what put it all into context so that we could truly understand.

Before leaving Quixaya, we took time to visit some of the Mayan villages bordering scenic Lake Atitlan. We also spent a day traveling to a women's weaving co-op and had some down time in the popular tourist destinations of Panajachel and Antigua.

As our visit came to an end, it was difficult to say good-bye, first to the Rafael, Carlota, Elmer and Cesar, the family whose home we had been building, and then to all of our new CCDA friends in Quixaya. They gave us a wonderful send off, including a party with dancing and a marimba band.

We are all very thankful to the CCDA and Education In Action for the opportunity that this delegation gave us to learn and experience life in Guatemala. It was an experience that will forever change the way we see the world.



Men hauling anise from fields



Young girl in Quixaya brings corn to mill for morning tortillas



Women removing anise seeds from plant stalks