

The Hunger Crisis in Guatemala

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Global Research, August 18, 2020

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

A report released by Oxfam in July 2020 [states](#), “COVID-19 is deepening the hunger crisis in the world’s hunger hotspots and creating new epicentres of hunger across the globe. By the end of the year 12,000 people per day could die from hunger linked to COVID-19, potentially more than will die from the disease itself.” Like other regions in the world, Latin America, too, is set to witness the intensification of an already-existing hunger crisis with the number of people facing severe food insecurity [increasing](#) from 4.3 million in 2019 to 16 million in 2020, an increase of 269%.

Unprotected from the various global setbacks, Guatemala is also experiencing the pain of a hunger crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In June 2020, the World Food Programme (WFP) [wrote](#) the following about Guatemala: “With 2.3 million people in food insecurity nation-wide...and an additional 2.3 million people directly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, it is estimated that in the next 4 months, 800,000 people will be in severe food insecurity and need of food assistance”. In June 2020, [1.2 million](#) people were in need of emergency food aid, an increase of 570,000 from the beginning of the year. At the end of May 2020, more than 15,000 cases of acute malnutrition were reported among children, exceeding the total number for the year 2019. In urban and peri-urban areas, the number of people requiring food assistance will [double or triple](#) in 2020. In Chiquimula, for example, there are 221 children with acute malnutrition, an [increase](#) of 56.6% from the last year. In the municipality of Camotán, there are 67 cases of malnutrition, an astronomic [increase](#) from 18 cases the previous year.

Angela Naletilic, Deputy Director for Action Against Hunger in Central America, [says](#) that

“More than half of Guatemalan households are having difficulty accessing markets and four out of ten families are using coping strategies that leave them worse off, such as depleting their savings or selling some of their assets,”.

Due to disruptions in supply chains, there has been a [spike](#) in food prices in Guatemala, further pushing the country into a 2008-like food price crisis where a 34% increase in the price of yellow maize [plunged](#) 450,000 Guatemalans into poverty. As a result of the aggravating hunger pandemic in Guatemala, protests have been staged and [according](#) to an agitator,

“We are dying not only from the virus but also from hunger, poverty, forgetfulness of the state, exploitation by businessmen, and corruption by politicians and the military”.

The present-day hunger crisis in Guatemala is a result of long-term, neoliberal policies,

oriented towards the economic subordination of the country as a stable periphery for the global imperialist empire. Beginning roughly from the 1980s and 1990s, the country has witnessed the large-scale economic entrenchment of a neoliberal food system characterized by the growth of agro-export crops (mainly palm oil and sugarcane), decreasing land for domestic food crops and a grotesque land concentration in the hands of the few. In Guatemala, two-thirds of the agricultural land is [dominated](#) by 2.5% of the country's farms, less than 1% of landowners [hold](#) 75% of the best agricultural land, [90%](#) of rural inhabitants live in poverty, [27%](#) of rural dwellers do not own land and more than [500,000](#) campesino families live below the level of subsistence. The average minimum landholding necessary for family subsistence in the country is between 4.5 and 7 hectares. In [1979](#), "88 percent of productive farm units were less than family subsistence size, holding 16 percent of arable land, while 2 percent of units held 65 percent of arable land...Between 1964 and 1979 the number of farms of less than 3.5 hectares doubled; between 1950 and 1979, the average farm size among those with less than 7 hectares fell from 2.4 to 1.8 hectares." Through this drastic decrease in the size of landholdings, approximately [96%](#) of farm units (comprising 20% of all agricultural lands) fell into the subsistence or below-subsistence categories in 1998.

Export-oriented Agro-industrialization in Guatemala

The undermining of subsistence and food security by land concentration has been accompanied by the destabilization of maize-self sufficiency and the concomitant substitution of food crops with agro-export crops. [Maize](#) in Guatemala is grown on one-third of the agricultural land and accounts for 91 per cent of the total cereal area in the country. It is also used in the making milpa, an ancient polycultural system of beans, maize and a variety of native greens. In the 1961-1990 period, maize imports had [accounted](#) for less than 4% of total consumption. Since then, imports have increased exponentially, accounting for one-third of the domestic supply. Whereas [98%](#) of Guatemala's total maize consumption during the 1980s was domestically produced, the proportion has [declined](#) to an average of 76% since 1990. This undermining of domestic maize production capabilities has occurred through reductions in agricultural expenditures and credits. Between 1983 and 1987, state credit for maize, beans and rice [fell](#) by 40%.

Withdrawal of state support for traditional maize farmers combined with the introduction of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) of 2004 to disrupt traditional agricultural practices. The free trade agreement [allowed](#) "US agribusiness to flood the markets with subsidized grains, further undermining local production. Extreme poverty spiked by 10 percentage points between 2006 and 2014". While Guatemala farmers stopped receiving any support from the state, American corn farmers [continued](#) to "receive both direct subsidies (an average of \$28,000 per farmer, which is more than five times Guatemala's per capita GDP)...and indirect supports (like cheap water for irrigations and cheap oil made into fertilizers)". As a result of this serious disparity, U.S. imports to Guatemala [grew](#) by 90 percent in less than a decade after DR-CAFTA, the sales of American produce in maize, wheat, and soy reaching \$1.1 billion in 2014. From 649 Metric Tons (MT) in 2004, Guatemala's maize imports have [grown](#) to 1600 MT in 2019. Currently, 4 of the top 5 exports of Guatemala are [agricultural products](#), an indication of the economic extensiveness of DR-CAFTA.



The systematic dismantling of domestic maize production has paved the way for the installation of an export-oriented agricultural model comprising predominantly of palm oil and sugarcane. In 2008, the government of Guatemala [considered](#) 1,101,604 hectares, or thirty-seven per cent of the country's total farmland, to be suitable for sugarcane and oil palm cultivation. In [2010](#), 102,000 hectares had been planted with oil palms and the area expansion from 2000 to 2010 was 590%. Between 2000 and 2016, palm oil production in Guatemala [climbed](#) six-fold, making it the second-largest oil palm producer in Latin America. The expansion of sugar-cane plantations in Guatemala [occurred](#) between 2001 and 2012, leading to a 55% increase in production area and a 46% increase in production volume. Total production in 2012 reached 2.5 million tons of sugar, of which 61 per cent were exported, and the total area amounted to 256,000 hectares. Annually, Guatemala [produces](#) over 2.7 million MT of sugar, [ranking](#) as the second largest sugar exporter in Latin America and fourth in the world.

Through the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane, food insecurity has heightened. The [planting](#) "of oil palm and sugarcane over lands previously dedicated to peasant and small-scale capitalist farming is eroding local wage labor opportunities because it is much less labor-intensive...oil palm and sugarcane require 52 and 36 working days per hectare/year respectively, while, for instance, the two annual maize harvests require 112 and chili cultivation 184 working days." [Substitution](#) of food crops "by the corporately owned plantations [of palm oil and sugarcane] diminishes the employment and income opportunities of small-scale corn producers, regional traders and micro-entrepreneurs. These losses are not sufficiently compensated by the jobs and incomes offered by the agribusiness companies. The assertion that the highly capitalized agribusiness is a source of additional incomes and employment is not true in the case of Guatemala."

Guatemala's Annual Agricultural Survey of 2013 has [found](#) that a continuous growth of agro-export land surface in ten years, from 2003 to 2013, has coincided with a 26% decrease in the total agricultural employment. When income decreases, people are unable to afford food items and presently, [half](#) of the population is not able to afford the basic food basket. [In addition](#) to the loss of income, sugarcane and palm oil cultivation have "contributed to the disappearance of certain nutritious foods...compromised ecological resources (e.g. water, forest, and soils), and heightened the region's exposure to external shocks (e.g. oil palm price fluctuations). Furthermore, food insecurity is exacerbated by the scalar incongruence between (beyond-community) food system threats, shocks and stresses, and (primarily within-household) adaptation strategies in relation to self- and market- provisioning of food."

Violence, Securitization and Environmental Disaster

Palm oil and sugarcane plantations, apart from leading to market-oriented de-peasantization, also cause displacement, environmental disasters, economic uncertainty

and consequently, food insecurity. In the Polochic Valley, for example, negotiations between campesino communities, state agencies, and the Chabil Utzaj sugar cane company [fell](#) apart in March 2011 “as at least 14 violent evictions were carried out between January and March 2011 on land claimed by the company. Community corn fields were destroyed in Canlún during the blitz, and private security guards returned to attack campesinos from the group on 21 May, killing Oscar Reyes with 12 gunshots and wounding at least three others”.

Through the use of violence against campesinos cultivating maize and other food crops, the [sugar cane company](#) was able to displace the peasants from their own lands, eliminate domestic food production in the region, force the campesinos into being dependent on imported food for consumption and exploit the rising food prices of the 2007-2008 period. Not having any disposable income as a result of crop destruction, the evicted campesinos were left in a state of intense food insecurity wherein the rising food prices disallowed them from achieving a basic subsistence level.

Like sugarcane, palm oil monocultures, too, are associated with environmental disasters, violence and food insecurity. A farmer settled in southwest Peten [talks](#) about how palm oil companies, through their securitization and militaristic regulation of agricultural lands, create barriers for food production: “When I want to go to my land, they don’t let me; I have to ask permission to harvest my corn or take out firewood or construction wood. I have to give accounts of what I take. This is what the company has done. They made it private property and planted palm on both sides of the road and don’t let anyone pass anymore. The security guards inspect what I carry in my bag when I go to my field in the morning; they write down my name and my identification number and they repeat this in the afternoon, too.” Many a times, palm oil companies don’t have the consent of the community and operate without any governmental licenses. [According](#) to a person living in the Polochic Valley,

“In 1996 the palm [cultivation] began [here], without the consent of the communities ... they just came, planted their palm, and put up their factory. They didn’t ask if it’s okay or what the communities think about it At first, they said it is going to bring development and it’s a good process. But the truth is, there’s no development – rather, it’s a disaster.”

Along with securitized regulation and the violation of free, prior and informed consent, palm oil production is also linked to environmental disasters and the contamination of the Río la Pasió River in the Sayaxché municipality is a paradigmatic example of such catastrophes. In May 2015, the oxidation lagoons (containing wastes from oil mills and chemicals for fertilizers and pesticides) of the company Reforestadora de Palma S.A. (REPSA), a subsidiary of the biggest producer of palm oil in Guatemala, the Olmeca group, overflowed due to heavy rains and spilled their contents (mainly malathion) into the surrounding areas. As a result of this spillover, four severe [effects](#) were produced: “1) an at least 150 km-long section of the [Río la Pasió] river damaged; 2) between 13 to 17 communities [of the Sayaxché municipality] directly affected (more than 12,000 persons) along with, indirectly, the whole department [of Petén] ; 3) fish populations of at least 23 species identified by a government institution decimated as a result of the toxic spill; and 4) the possibility that the river’s ecosystem would never recover”.

Out of the 23 species decimated by the spillover, six were endangered species and six had economic value for the communities. With the deaths of the economically valuable fishes,

there has been a concomitant [loss](#) of 8 million euros. In addition to ecological-economic loss, the malathion overflow has heavily impacted the communities living in the department of Peten since [exposure](#) to the chemical “interferes with the normal functioning of the nerves and the brain; and exposure to very high levels in air, water, or food for a short time can cause shortness of breath, chest tightness, vomiting, cramps, diarrhea, blurred vision, excessive sweating, dizziness, unconsciousness, and death.” Melding and synchronizing the all-pervasive effects of the malathion spillover, Saúl Paau, a community Leader, [characterizes](#) it as a crime against humanity:

“We can categorize the case as a crime against humanity, because not only are various species of our rivers being killed, but the river is also part of our historical culture, it is part of our territory, we feed on it, and with pollution and fish mortality today the food security of each and all the 116 thousand inhabitants that live in the municipalities of Sayaxché is violated...The issue of the breakdown of the ecosystem and the environment is not only water and fish, it is air, is human health, environmental health”.

The ecological catastrophe in the Sayaxché municipality was in the making for many years since the palm oil project of REPSA did not have an approved Environmental Impact Study (EIS) and despite this the Guatemalan state allowed the company to carry out its operations. Américo González López, Mayor of the Manos Unidos Cooperative, [talks](#) about how the RESPA palm oil project in the Sayaxché municipality was flawed from the beginning and had state protection for whatever plunder it did in the region: “This case [contamination of Río la Pasió] proves that MARN [Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources] has failed and that the municipality has failed. The people of the area were not consulted about the project in spite of the fact that it was a project with a huge environmental impact. How is it possible that this type of situation was not foreseen? Or that now the government doesn’t know what to do to mitigate the harm done? This shows that the EIS were not real. They monopolize the water. They divert the river water to their greenhouses or for watering the palm trees, and the rivers are drying up. In the 48 years I have lived here, I have never seen river levels so low. The watering holes in our pasturelands have dried up and that has never happened before. They took down too many trees, and now they are using too much water.” The disruption of hydrological dynamics by palm oil companies is not an isolated event and the destruction of water balances is a part and parcel of palm oil production which has an extremely [high](#) water requirement of 5500 m³ /ton of crop yield - about five times that of maize.

Various organizations have attempted to protest the unencumbered pillage of REPSA and to bring attention to the irreparable ecological damage being done by the company. A local community group called the Commission for the Defense of Life and Nature, for instance, took legal action and won a [court ruling](#) that called the spill as an “[ecocide](#)” and asked the company to suspend operations for six months at the Sayaxché palm plantation in Petén. But these judicial decisions have been overturned by [violence](#) linked to RESPA. Subsequent to the court ruling, three environmental defenders were kidnapped and a fourth activist, named Rigoberto Lima Choc, a 28-year-old schoolteacher from Champerico who had filed the complaint, was killed. After this spate of violence, REPSA continued with its palm oil business. Along with overt violence, REPSA is also utilizing informational platforms, confrontational tactics and securitization strategies to quell long-term resistance against its environmentally disastrous operations. Lorenzo Pérez, Coordinator of the National Council of Displaced Persons of Guatemala, [says](#),

“Other companies sit down at the dialogue table and are more respectful, but REPSA doesn’t want to meet with the people. They have security personnel who take videos and photos of journalists. They are currently harassing journalists and have an ongoing REPSA radio campaign to convince people of their good image. People are aware of the impact they are having, but in order to keep their job, they don’t say anything. Some time ago when 15 workers tried to form a union, they were fired.”

Meanwhile, the people of Sayaxché continue to suffer from the ecocide and the [statement](#) of María Margarita Hernández de Herrera, a 45-year-old Q’eq’chi Mayan woman, living with her husband and three children in the village of Canaán, in Sayaxché, Petén, expresses the long-term repercussions of the river contamination for the livelihoods of many:

“This [river contamination] is the most difficult thing for a community that lives surrounded by [palm oil]plantations, because we’ve lost the lands where we used to cultivate our crops; and with the contamination of the river, we can no longer fish and prepare the catch alongside the river to eat with our beans. The entire environment is contaminated because now we have constant infestations of flies in our food, on our fruits, so we have to take special care that the children don’t get sick. We see that the color and the smell of the river has changed; our water sources have diminished; and when we wash our clothes and bathe our children in the river, we get skin lesions, diarrhea, nausea.”

In its 1989 annual report, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) had blamed the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s for the death of hundreds of thousands of children in the Global South. Instead of using bland, benumbed and bureaucratic jargon, it had [used](#) unequivocal terms to condemn the cruelty of structural adjustment programs:

“It is essential to strip away the niceties of economic parlance and say that what has happened is simply an outrage against a large segment of humanity. The developing world’s debt, both in the manner in which it was incurred and in the manner in which it is being ‘adjusted to’ is an economic stain on the second half of the twentieth century. Allowing world economic problems to be taken out on the growing minds and bodies of young children is the antithesis of all civilized behavior. Nothing can justify it. And it shames and diminishes us all.”

The words used by UNICEF back then in 1989 resonate loudly with the current situation in Guatemala. In this country, the prevalence of stunting in children under 5 is one of the [highest](#) in the world at 46.5% nationally. The stunting rate rises to 70% in some departments and 90% in the hardest hit municipalities. In 2019, food insecurity had worsened as more than [78%](#) of the corn and bean harvest was lost in the year, affecting 250,000 people. Child malnutrition also [increased](#) from 60% in 2016 to 69% in 2019. Silveria Pérez, a mother of four living in a rural Guatemalan community, [says](#),

“You’re told your child is malnourished. You get scared and wonder if your child is going to die. You can’t sleep because you’re thinking about what you can do. But as you have no money, there’s no way he’ll get better.”

All this is slated to aggravate in the coming months as neoliberal capitalism, unable to look

beyond the narrow horizons of profit maximization, fails to tackle the hunger crisis and becomes “an outrage against a large segment of humanity”.

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