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Central America Update, How it mirrors the world and what we can learn from it.

El Salvador

Elections

The Civil Society of El Salvador said it all in the voting booths. The Arena Party, with its notorious Death Squads in the '80s roaming the country, intimidating movements that were critical of the government, was rejected. [Click for video](#) The current party, a populist group, headed by Mauricio Funes, a former journalist, defeated the Arena candidate. Funes has promised change, beginning with strengthening ties with the United States. Only a few of the 750,000 Salvadorans here could afford to return to vote, but their remittances keep many families alive. In the repatriated village of Santa Marta we've been visiting for 17 years at least one member and often more have left for the states to find work and send dollars home.



CAFTA will soon increase unemployment, the major problem. These misnamed "free" trade agreements are only free for corporations to export cheap US subsidized agricultural products and build factories where they pay below minimum wages and don't pay taxes, often for five years when they often move on to another country. And in the US this policy creates unemployment, too.

The Salvadoran economist Alfonso Goitia says 40 per cent of the workforce is still employed in agriculture. Out of a total population of six million, 750,000 Salvadorans became political or economic exiles prior to the 1992 peace accords ending the civil war. Today two million live in the U.S.A. because - under a series of ARENA governments over the last fifteen years - El Salvador has embraced free trade, adopted the dollar as its currency, privatized public services, ratified CAFTA, and consigned a large percentage of the population to continued poverty and exploitation. In the countryside, small farmers can't maintain their own plots without government support or survive on the wages paid for day labor at larger farms. For those forced to seek work in urban areas, the choices aren't good either. In the manufacturing sector, jobs are concentrated in high-security export zone factories with low wages, sweatshop working conditions, and union-busting multinational employers. SUTTELL, the telephone workers' union, tried to organize 1 women assemblers at ABX Industries, an electronic component maker in San Bartolo. 30 were fired and black-

listed with the complicity of the Labor Ministry, forced into the informal economy, the vast army of Salvadorans peddling fruit, sneakers, toys, packaged snacks, and home-made food items at rickety roadside stands and in crowded central market places throughout the country. One of the street vendors' biggest product lines - pirated CDs and DVDs - now makes them a special target of local police, trained by the U.S.-financed International Law Enforcement Academy in San Salvador. Where the U.S. once aided and abetted "death squads," it now spends millions of aid dollars orchestrating a crackdown on any infringers on CAFTA-protected "intellectual property rights."

Making Change

In contrast small, people-organized examples of projects help youth work creatively:



* Santa Marta's COCOSI (Youth educating communities in the struggle against teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS)<http://www.cocosi.org>



* Museo Aja! in Santa Ana educates children and community about the connection between peace and saving the planet in a way that makes one say: aha! (aja! in Spanish) Permaculture and other projects of SIGLOXXIII, a movement for social transformation through culture founded by Marta Benevides sigloxxiii@hotmail.com



* Radio Victoria (youth run community radio station, many from Santa Marta who have also gone on to university!) that not only reaches a wide range of Cabanas with the new antenna they put up, but Salvadorans in the US can get it on broadband!)

<http://www.radiovictoria.org/ingles.html>



“The people living here don’t believe in violence against women.

ponelsal@yahoo.com



***Sr Peggy’s Art for Peace classes and museum, programs in the rural areas of Suchitoto**

Guatemala

Change has come by the ballot box in Guatemala, but many say the President’s wife really runs the country and the President is so beholden that he can’t do much but say some good things from time to time.

As in the rest of Central America, Walmart has bought up the major grocery chains. Huge warehouses of used clothes and other household items are found all over Guatemala City. A local man owns them, buys and ships the used items from the US (probably from Goodwill unsold merchandise) sorts by size and color and type of item.



They provide Guatemalans cheap sometimes even new items, and many jobs.

In the rural area of San Martin Manuel and Brigida Hooz have built a totally integrated sustainable model farm on land we first saw as only steep hillside in 1976. Work had begun then by a number of families who, in the 80's had to flee the brutal war against the indigenous that the US helped fund and Clinton apologized for.

Their cattle produce organic fertilizer for their coffee and they sell it to the organic coffee cooperative. The gas generated from the urine fuels their kitchen stove The social, financial, agricultural and environmental components of sustainable organic farming are 3.

stressed in the classes given here. Corn is shucked for the fowl who produce fertilizer for the vegetables.



Another amazing story that grew out of the guerilla struggle in the jungle of the Peten. Guerrillas and their families bought land to build Nuevo Horizonte, a cooperative village dedicated to Comandante Maria, a young woman from a wealthy family who wanted to be buried here with her companeros.

Less than four hundred people in eleven years have built a library, that badly needs books and magazines, a pharmacy and clinic, a pre-school, elementary and high school with local teachers and the RN who now are paid by the government. Their schools are open to the neighboring villages.

There are a cooperative groups who run stores, carpentry, egg production, green houses, fish farming, graze cattle, etc.

And they're set up for eco-tourists and tours in the rainforest with knowledgeable Toton.

There are strong women who have formed support groups that build women's self-esteem and decrease spousal abuse.

They've reached out to reconcile with the military with soccer matches now. and they've struggled in court against the banks that charged them too much for the land.

“Many small people in small places doing many small things can change the world” is painted on a wall.

These people have accomplished so much with so little. They truly embody cooperation.

Nicaragua



Cantera, our home in Nicaragua. We've known Mary Hartman since '82 and Anabel Torres since before they founded this model Popular Education and Training Center and have seen their projects grow:

Ciudad Sandino was a squatters' town after the floods whom CANTERA helped find their own leaders to decide what priorities the people had: A pre-school was first.



They needed a study library because they couldn't afford text books for their kids. The people have worked together to develop all this plus art and music groups.



In the town of Mateare the middle schoolers we brought down built the tables and stools at their study center where music and dance are popular and part of the Youth week celebration nationwide

Because of the high cost of western medicine they've organized training in growing and preparing natural medicines and alternative practices and sustainable farming.



Chepe is the coordinator. And they raise bees and make award winning honey and other products from honey.

In Nicaragua, La Union used to be a cooperative grocery chain. Under the Alemann government it was bought by Walmart who buy US subsidized beef for less than it costs the Nicaraguan farmer to raise it without subsidies. Of course the pay and working conditions are not good, but with 40-60% unemployment, it's a job.

In 1980 the literacy campaign raised the literacy rate from 25% to 75 %, but with school fees and not enough money to buy books or even newspapers that dropped to the 1980 figure. Though school fees were supposed to be eliminated when Daniel was elected again in 2006 books and uniforms have kept 200,000 students from going to school this year who were enrolled last year.

These are children with special problems or who are older than their grade level for not having been in school. There is no public school for them so this is church sponsored. A really dedicated staff welcomed us to come and work with the kids a couple of days.... a real challenge with the street noise with no window or wall to muffle and no barrier between the classroom and the blacksmith on the other side. USAID does furnish food for the noon meal they serve.

Women organizing unemployed women or working in maquilas can get into the factories because they're not labeled a union. There is little they can do but sometimes help an individual with a family problem or report harrasment. Maquilas are closing in all of Central America. They used to move between them for the cheapest labor and then moved to China, but with the decline in consumerism they've just closed. The spirit of hope that stayed alive through so much turmoil.

Vilma Nunes still has hope. She headed the Human Rights Commission during the first



Sandinista period. She now has her own commission. She made clear that there are Sandinistas and Danielistas and the two weren't the same. Her house was splattered with red paint by Danielistas because she dares to criticize the government.

She's left it as a symbol that criticism is necessary for progress.

What continues is what people have created like CANTERA and Batahola Norte Community Center. The students are the teachers now and they are creating new centers. An example of what Margaret Mead said: a small group of dedicated people is the only way change is made.

Global Food Crisis

The Salvadoran minimum wage in rural areas, for those with a full time job is \$115 per month, and in the city, \$140, Marta Benevides reports.



In Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, El Salvador indigenous grandmothers walk hours every Sunday to sell their meager produce. Prices have skyrocketed: 14 plantains for a dollar in 2006, to 6 for a dollar now, 25 tortillas for a dollar, 18 now, 30 pieces of bread to 19 and also true for corn, beans, rice, salt, eggs, milk. Gas, water, electricity are also very high, and often the service is not provided. The price of transportation is 25% higher and there are threats that it will double soon. Of course those in extreme poverty have drastically increased. Some families now eat only once a day and people roam around looking for food.

The government got the legislature to pass a law allowing GMOs to be used for planting, so people can have food to eat. The government blames the situation on international situations, without mentioning that for many years it decided, intentionally not to have an agricultural plan, but develop the country into the "maquila" (factories) center for the region instead. Right now is the rainy season, it just began. The Government obtained \$10 million dollars to buy genetically modified seeds, to give to the peasantry, as a gift, part of an agricultural package that includes fertilizer and pesticides (which they need). The World Bank and IMF, says that 100 countries will suffer hunger and starvation. El Salvador is one and less prepared to face this critical time. The former Arena government's slogan is a "Government of Humane Sensibility," declared it can't do anything about raising prices, and especially those of gasoline, for it is committed to free trade. It trimmed the budget, saving \$15 million to help the poor! While it continues to spend \$150 million in publicity and promotion of its programs. Hopefully the new government will turn matters around.

But the global food crisis has been long in the making. In the 80's possibly beginning in Africa, farmers were bribed by multi-nationals to plant cash crops. The corporation would plow and pick up the harvest. Though women grew the food crops, they had no say, and thus less food was grown. Many countries that used to be food self-sufficient now must import food.

Another cause is that genetically modified (GM) seeds can't be saved to plant next season. This makes farming more expensive. Also, those seeds take more water (as did those of the green revolution) and more pesticides and herbicides, adding further costs, plus undermining food security by diminishing the variety of seeds.

Imports have brought more packaged foods that are less culturally appropriate, less nutritious and produce more trash.

Especially serious is when staples must be imported:

*** In Mexico, NAFTA required allowing US subsidized corn to be imported which wiped out the market for local farmers' and forced them to cities or up north to find jobs.**

*** In rice growing Cambodia the price shot up so farmers exported, raising local prices even further.**

*** In Vietnam, US corporations got farmers to grow more coffee (to depress the world market to increase corporate profits) which lead to less food grown.**

US trade policies that favor corporations rather than focus on decreasing poverty have been a major cause. But of course the rise in transport costs due to increased gasoline has contributed. Biofuel has taken land away from food crops. Biofuel uses water, oil based fertilizer and pesticides which add up to more oil used to create them. IN balance it doesn't make sense.

Are you growing a vegetable garden? Or allowing friends who want to to use part of your garden to grow vegetables and fruit? In some cities it's a movement. San Francisco has its "My Farm."

War Policy Isn't Working

*** Aside from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars demonstrating that war doesn't bring about democracy, many signs show that foreign/military policy doesn't work.**

*** US Nuclear Submarine Collides in Strait Near Iran," Reuters, March 20, 2009.**

The second involving a US nuclear submarine in the Strait of Hormuz in two years.

*** Peter Verga, a senior US defense policy official, has admitted that US missile defense tests are not realistic and do not simulate actual conditions.**

*** Nonviolent methods, including a hunger strike, were key in influencing Czech legislators to oppose the missile defense plans and bring down the government.**

Tamas, Jan, Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, March 24, 2009.

*** African countries are concerned about AFRICOM, the US military presence there.**

*** The US Southern Command is sailing off the coast of Venezuela for the first time since WWII, not reassuring to South American nations.**

*** Abolish Nuclear weapons in our life time! Now is the time to take the lead to abolish nuclear weapons so that we can never use them again and end the threat of nuclear weapons.**

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