

Guatemala

GEOGRAPHY

Guatemala is a country in Central America, about half the size of Victoria. Most of its 12 million people live in the central highland region or the coastal plains, while the vast area of rainforest in the north is sparsely populated. Guatemala has been called the “land of eternal spring” because of its mild temperatures (10°C to 21°C), but it can be cold in the mountains. The region is also subject to earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanic activity. In October 2005, Hurricane Stan caused 900 mudslides, which killed an estimated 2,000 people and destroyed homes and crops.

PEOPLE

The capital is Guatemala City, while the former colonial capital, Antigua, is a tourist centre. Many people from poor rural communities are moving to the cities, where most economic and educational resources are concentrated. Indigenous Mayans represent the majority of Guatemala’s population. Indigenous Mayans, Xinka and Garifuna people have retained their languages and distinctive cultures, in spite of centuries of oppression. Although Spanish is the official language, 22 indigenous languages are still spoken today. The name “Ladinos” is given to people of mixed Spanish/Mayan ancestry, and those who have adopted the Spanish language and customs. Most Guatemalans belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Support for the Protestant churches has been increasing. Many Mayan communities practise a combination of Mayan Cosmovision (or spirituality) and Christianity.



Map courtesy of Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

HISTORY

The Mayan civilisation flourished in this region from the third to the ninth century AD. The Mayans grew many crops, traded extensively by land and sea, and undertook great building projects.

From 1523, Spanish invaders seeking mineral wealth set out to conquer the various Indian groups. Many Indigenous Guatemalans died, not only in bloody battles, but as a result of slavery and European diseases. At this time the Quetzal became a symbol for the Mayans. This bird that cannot remain alive in captivity represents Tecum Uman, the last Mayan warrior, and symbolises their desire for freedom.

Since independence from Spain in 1821, Guatemala’s history has been turbulent. There have been many violent dictatorships and military coups. The army and the land-owning elite have wielded great power. Attempts to suppress opposition were brutal, and guerrillas fought government forces in a bloody internal armed conflict. After long negotiations, a peace agreement ending the 36 year internal armed conflict was signed in December in 1996.

The UN estimates that over 90 percent of an estimated 200,000 people who lost their lives were killed by the Guatemalan armed forces. Up to a million people were displaced from their homes and many fled to Mexico or the United States seeking asylum. There has been almost no progress in bringing those responsible to justice, as the military retains significant influence in Guatemala.



World Vision works with Guatemalan families to create income generating opportunities through food production.

ECONOMY

Almost all land is controlled by a small proportion of the people. The best land is devoted to export crops (coffee, bananas, sugar) and tropical forest has been cleared to make way for beef cattle. Many peasants who cannot make a living from their small, less fertile hillside plots have to find extra work on the large coffee farms, or migrate to the cotton and sugar plantations near the Pacific coast. When agriculture is so important to people gaining an income, unfair distribution of land is a major cause of poverty.

LIVING CONDITIONS

More than 50 percent of Guatemalans live below the national poverty line, and about the same percentage are unemployed or under-employed. The staple diet is tortillas (bread made from corn that is soaked, then ground and made into corn dough) and black beans. Meat and milk are unaffordable luxuries for most families.

Government spending on health is small, and health facilities are poor, especially in rural areas. Malnutrition rates are among the highest in the world. Preventable diseases such as measles, whooping cough and polio lead to many child deaths. Life expectancy for the indigenous population is many years shorter than for the Ladinos, because the indigenous communities lack essential services.

EDUCATION

One-quarter of the adult population is unable to read and write, partly because the school system has often provided academic instruction in Spanish rather than practical subjects taught in local languages. Almost half of all children do not finish primary school because they have to work in the fields to help with their family's income.



Improving access to education is an important goal of World Vision's work in Guatemala.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	GUATEMALA	AUSTRALIA
Population	14.4 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	49.5%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$2,536	\$38,692
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	11.73%	0%
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	94%	100%
Adult literacy rate	73.8%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	70.8 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	35	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN GUATEMALA

- through child sponsorship, assists children, their families and communities to gain increased access to things like clean water, healthcare, educational opportunities and low interest loans;
- assists young working women to continue their education;
- supports a country-wide program to immunise children and train volunteer health promoters;
- works with communities to increase their knowledge about their rights and responsibilities as Guatemalan citizens (eg. in obtaining land title) and supports efforts to bring about reconciliation and peace after years of conflict.