

COVID 19 STRIKES GUATEMALA

By Ali Durbin (ref. Enfoque Ixan Newsletter Vol 16-2 Summer 2020)

Covid-19 has severely impacted Guatemala's health care system, economy, and society, exacerbating the country's existing poverty, malnutrition, and inequality. The country is officially registering about 1,000 new cases per day, and over 2,300 Guatemalans have died of Covid-19.

The government has ordered strict measures to attempt to contain the infection. Borders, schools, and parks are closed; public transportation is halted; and gatherings of any size are banned. Curfews keep the population inside from 6pm to 5am daily and all day on Sundays. Mask use in public is required.

While the restrictions have somewhat slowed the spread of Covid, the government has failed to implement a parallel policy to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the crisis.

About 70% of Guatemala's population works in the informal sector, without a steady salary or benefits, relying on their day-to-day earnings in market stalls, corner stores, and farms. Many have lost most or all of their income. People hang white flags outside of their homes to indicate that they need food, or red flags if they need medicine. The federal government's aid program has been inadequate and poorly implemented. Non-profit agencies have launched soup kitchens and food deliveries.

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Conducting the business of the Partnership

Virtually!

By Dave Johnson

It was May 2020 and the unthinkable was now the reality. Here in the Boston area, we'd seen our advanced healthcare system taken to the brink of capacity in caring for COVID patients. Projecting such circumstances to the developing world in Guatemala was excruciating to even contemplate. The first defense against coronavirus in countries like Guatemala was to seal borders. So it was tacitly clear; for the first time in 33 years, a semi-annual delegation to Santa Maria Tzeja was impossible.

In our transformed lives, we've become quickly acquainted with Zoom, a user friendly video meeting platform. It works well for large meetings of people who have broadband internet access. So it was natural to ask: "Could we Zoom with committees of people in the village?" "Could it be done safely without disrupting social distancing protocols of village participants?" Ideas sprang up like wildfire for what the nature of virtual



Google Meet gathering August 2020

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Meeting with teachers in Santa Maria Tzeja

By Caryl Johnson

Three of the virtual meetings held in early August were with teachers at all levels in the SMT community.

Elementary School Teachers

Across Guatemala, all classrooms were idled by April. Only distance teaching was promoted. In a rural farming community such as Santa Maria Tzeja, there is no broadband internet. Homes are highly unlikely to have a computer. Parents in many homes do not have the education to assist their child in learning. In summary, teaching at the primary level (K-6) was problematic. The education ministry claimed to be preparing grade-appropriate distance teaching materials, but practically nothing was received for teachers to use in Santa Maria Tzeja.

The elementary teachers have navigated this terrain to provide some level of educational stimulation to their students. But they have so little to go on without books or other teaching tools. We agreed in our conversation that it is essential that these teachers have a facility to create, print out and distribute work packages of their own making.

How will all this turn out? We don't know. The academic year in Guatemala begins in January, and ends in October. With the timing of the pandemic, schools had barely reached 20% of the school year. A reality looms that grade advancement for these young students in 2020 is beyond the realm of possibility. Thankfully to date, the teachers have continued to receive pay from the Guatemala Education Ministry.



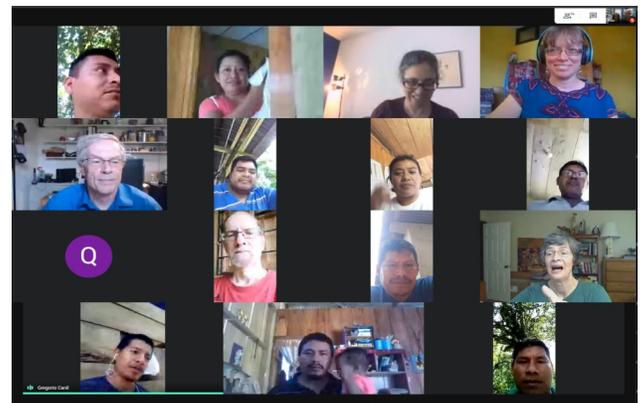
Elementary school teachers Aug 13, 2020

Middle School (Basico) Teachers

The middle school has made a strong effort to transition to remote teaching in core courses such as math, language arts (reading/writing), and science— all essential to fulfil grade advancement requirements. Other topics such as music, foreign language (English), industrial arts and physical education could not continue under the constraints.

Work assignments must be offered on paper, and picked up once per week by enrolled students from their teacher. At that time, one-on-one conferencing can take place between teacher and student.

Self learning is still a challenge in the grade 7-9 age group. While the 7th and 8th grades have retained the engagement of most students, the 9th grade lost the “attendance” of half the class. Meanwhile, the government was failing to provide its component of support of teacher pay as the pandemic unfolded. Funds from the Partnership have thus been a lifeline for these devoted professionals.



Meeting with middle school teachers Aug 5, 2020

Computer Science and proficiency Teaching

As with all classrooms, the village computer center had to close its doors in April. Yet learning to be proficient with computers is as much a core curriculum requirement as math and language arts.

Guatemala's public health care system, already underfunded and underequipped, is on the verge of collapse. At overcrowded hospitals, waiting rooms and hallways have been turned into Covid treatment areas, with patients lying on the floor. Health care workers often must provide their own personal protective equipment. At one coronavirus-designated facility in Guatemala City, the Health Ministry has not paid clinicians for four months. Many Guatemalans prefer to suffer illness at home rather than risk the appalling conditions at public facilities.

Although the Ixcán officially has only about 100 Covid cases so far, the region faces severe challenges as the caseload grows. The regional coronavirus clinic is a refitted tailors' shop that lacks ventilators and other essential equipment.

Access to clean water is key in preventing Covid-19 and ensuring good health overall, yet only 14% of people in the Ixcán have piped water in their homes. Others must haul water from rivers, streams, and wells, then boil or filter it for consumption.

Worldwide, differences in educational quality during the pandemic are revealing and replicating underlying inequalities. In rural Ixcán, most people do not have computers or internet service, so virtual learning is not an option. About 80% of Guatemalan public school students have done no schooling since March.

Amidst the challenges, the Ixcán has strengths for weathering this pandemic. The region has fertile land and abundant waterways. Many farmers in the Ixcán planted extra corn, beans, rice, and other staples this year to ensure their food security in case of eventual shortages or transportation difficulties due to Covid.

The region's history epitomizes collective strength and endurance. Ixcán's inhabitants carved communities out of the remote jungle, survived a state-led genocide, and continue to protect their lands against exploitative mega-projects. Many Ixcán communities are tight-knit, organized, and supportive. The people of the Ixcán are drawing on their historical wisdom and ongoing resilience to confront this current crisis.

The Mail Keeps Flowing

By Dave Johnson

In my basement, the bag that carries the mail to Santa Maria Tzeja was going nowhere this summer. I contemplated: Would there be no partner letter exchange because travel to Santa Maria was beyond possible?

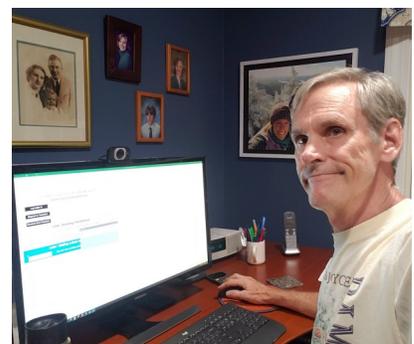
In June, I contacted Carmen Reyes who runs the computer classroom in Santa Maria to ask.. "Is there any chance that you would be able to print out 125 letters, with embedded color photos?" As for reply letters, "Could you scan an equal number of hand-written letters?" She responded "¡Puede hacer!" (Can do!). Another challenge is the "final mile" problem of getting printed letters delivered to recipients in the village. I got in touch with the Improvement Committee and established an understanding that they would "figure out the distribution." Obtaining paper and printer supplies involved risks that they consented to take on. Thus, on short notice, you were asked to write a letter to your partner family. Volunteer translators converted the letters expeditiously to Spanish. By July 25, 120 letters were emailed, printed and entered circulation in Santa Maria. As of this writing 3 weeks later, 100 replies had come back to be forwarded to the translator team.



Carmen Reyes in SMT.



The Improvement Committee.



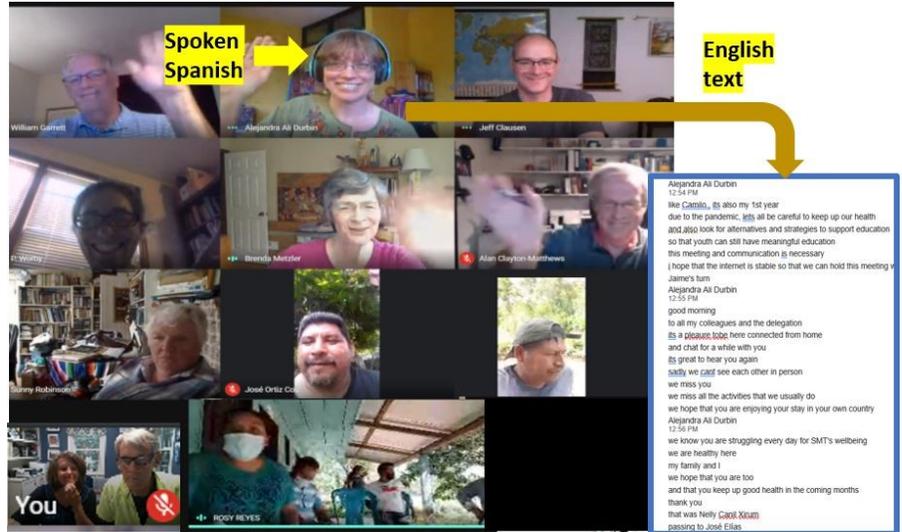
The August mailbag was "virtual!"

meetings might be.

In June we did some experiments and research. In short, it was not advisable to pursue and promote a wide scale event on Zoom owing to the village’s internet limitations of 3G cellular service. Subsequent testing established that Google’s Meet platform was more resilient to internet fluctuations in the village. The platform was also simple to use.

The Partnership’s delegation leaders (Caryl Johnson, Alan Clayton Matthews, and Bill Garrett) coordinated a calendar of meetings with committees in the village. A limited invite list gave more assurance the meetings could endure highly variable internet fidelity conditions of the village. In several meetings, villagers called in from 5 different locations including their own farming plots.

A feat of bilingual skill made the language barrier in these meetings much less imposing. Our interpreters, Ali Durbin and Paula Worby, listened to spoken Spanish while simultaneously typing into the chat box English translations. This was utterly masterful work!



Video gathering with village council. Upper center, Ali Durbin converts

Would we say a Virtual Delegation is an experience to match in-person travel to Santa Maria Tzeja? Definitely not. Missing were the experiences of meeting families for meals in their homes, entertaining and helping teach children, swimming at the waterfall, and witnessing a celebration of indigenous culture. But the video meetings affirmed our inter-community bonds are strong, and that staying connected is a powerful part of coping with circumstances we could never have envisioned.

COMPUTER (PG 2)

Imagine teaching computer without computers. The teachers surveyed what resources each student possessed and found some have iPad tablets and some have smart phones. There is no standard guidance coming from anywhere in the national education ministry. As teacher Gregori Canil explained, this is a “make it up as you go” process. It is student-by-student.

Frankly what will come of this is anything but certain. But teachers are creatively doing their best to intellectually engage students in topics they would be seeing in the classroom. Funding for the two teachers is provided through the Computer Center budget from private donors, and the Guatemala partnership.



Computer Committee and teachers Aug 2, 2020

We extend a special THANKS! to all of you who contributed donations to the Partnership this summer.

Multiple urgent and long-term village needs are being addressed by your collective kindness