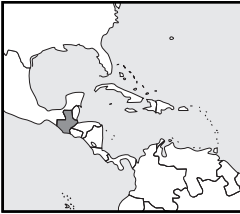


Urgent need for national reconstruction

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Since the World Summit on Social Development in 1995, the situation in Guatemala has changed with the end of the internal armed conflict that affected the country for more than four decades. The substantial content of the peace agreements, signed in 1996 by both parties in the conflict, left the Guatemalan people with an ambitious social agenda to be implemented by the society as a whole. Too little attention was given, however, to the explicit social participation necessary for construction of a true peace.

The ambitious agenda put forward by the peace accords demands that all Guatemalans – men, women, indigenous people, mestizos, youth, children, senior citizens and other social sectors – are given the opportunity to achieve equality, justice and democracy and, as a result, a better quality of life as the fundamental basis for building social peace.

Poverty, inequity, apathy and exclusion

Access to income and resources, the enjoyment of basic rights, and the opportunity to prosper both individually and collectively, are all subject to the system of exclusion which prevails in Guatemala. This system not only limits people's access to development, but also restricts forms of social support that might confront limitations of a different nature.

TABLE 1

Degree of inequity in the distribution of income - 1989 and 1998		
INDICATORS	1989	1998
Gini coefficient	0.58	0.55
Average income ratio between the richest 10% and the poorest 40%	21.1	18.2
Average income ratio between the richest 20% and the poorest 20%	23.6	17.3
Average income (in GTQ/quetzals)	568.9	640.4
<p>Note: Income from work added to other incomes was considered. Incomes deflated for September 1998 (CPI).</p> <p>Source: Calculations made with data from the National Sociodemographic Survey (1989) and ENIGFAM 1998/99.</p>		

More than 57% of the population is poor and more than a quarter (27%) lives in conditions of extreme poverty. Two-thirds of the labour force is affected by unemployment, unstable working conditions, and subsistence wages that affect primarily women, indigenous people and rural workers. According to labour statistics, there are currently 1,389 labour unions; of these, only 499 are active. The total number of affiliates is 66,445, of which only 11% are women. In 1999, the general directorate of labour approved only 29 collective agreements on labour conditions. This reflects the level of stagnation of a basic right, which should guarantee trade union organisation to balance the power relationship between capital and labour.

Land ownership has not changed in the last ten years, and the agricultural structure continues to be one of concentration in few hands. This in itself is a source of exclusion of an important social sector, the peasants.

The educational system lacks necessary formative elements. Specifically, those who suffer the consequences of the various forms of poverty cannot explain the causes that determine their condition of exclusion. Much less can they visualise the possible alternatives that might help them overcome this condition. The average schooling does not even reach the mandatory nine years of initial education, pre-primary and primary education established in the Political Constitution (Article 74). This situation is even worse in rural areas and among indigenous people and women.

Reaching the national health goal of "healthcare for everyone" has become a mere slogan of each new government, and the necessity of a national health policy is downplayed. Access to health services is characterised by enormous differences, and the system focuses on curative medicine.

Housing is scarce and there is no public policy that guarantees a decent roof over peoples' heads. The increase in peripheral urban settlements is a reflection of this lack.

Only 44% of the legally registered population participated in the November-December 1999 elections, with a notorious absence of women, young people and emigrants. This negative attitude toward elections was not new: only 19% of the population participated in the Popular Consultation of 16 May 1999 that was intended to create the juridical framework for the legality and legitimacy of the peace agreements. This reflects the serious difficulties facing the Guatemalan political system. As an heir to authoritarian and excluding practices, because of its own dynamics, and because the population lacks political culture, the government has not been able to stimulate a process of wider citizen participation in the absence of clear and committed measures to give real answers to authentic social demands and needs. The lack of seriousness of the proposal put forward in the Popular Consultation confused and disoriented the general population, creating a situation that was used by the most conservative sectors to wage a profound ideological battle against the 1996 peace agreements.

The citizenry is disenchanted, the judicial system functions inadequately and celerity in the application of the law is not a common practice. There is no effective force that works for the eradication of domestic violence or the protection of women, children, youth, senior citizens and the handicapped.

The national challenges

Given these conditions, subsistence places a heavy burden on wide sections of the population. The government has little ability to confront social problems, and the citizenry is poorly organised with little capacity to influence public policy. In the absence of a government that protects collective well-being, prostitution and the formation of youth gangs, among other social ills, are inadequate response mechanisms that entail tremendous social consequences.

TABLE 2

Poverty indicators - 1989 and 1998		
INDICATORS	1989	1998
Total population (in millions)	8.7	10.6
Percentage of poor people	63.1	56.7
Number of people under the poverty line (in millions)	5.5	6.0
Average distance from the poverty line (in percentage of the poverty line)	50.4	45.5
Resources necessary for the elimination of poverty as a percentage of family income	21.8	15.7
Resources necessary for the elimination of poverty as a percentage of non-poor family income	27.7	19.3
Average income of the poor (in monthly GTQ per person)	193	212.2
Distance of the average poor income from the poverty line (in monthly GTQ per person)	196.4	177.2
Total amount of the resources needed to eliminate poverty each year (in billions of GTQ)	12.9	12.7
Note: Income from work added to other incomes was considered. The poverty line used was that of 1999 (GTQ 389.30 monthly per person). USD 1 = GTQ 7 (May 1999)		
Source: Calculations made with data from the National Sociodemographic Survey (1989) and ENIGFAM 1998/99.		

Economic improvement has been hindered not only by globalisation but also by the international crisis, which has pushed the prices of products purchased on the market far above those received for local products such as coffee, bananas, cardamon and sugar. Other serious problems are capital flight and stock market losses. As if these were not enough, natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch affect the most vulnerable sectors of the population most and deepen poverty.

Currently, Guatemala faces three great inter-related challenges: sustaining the peace process and achieving national reconciliation; substantially improving the quality of life of the population (especially those living in poverty and extreme poverty); and advancing steadily toward sustained economic growth that goes hand in hand with human development.¹

Achieving a high quality of life for all inhabitants of this country necessarily requires the redistribution of wealth, social and political development, full respect and observance of human rights, the identity and rights of the indigenous peoples, and the search for equality in the relationships between men and women. The peace agreements offer more favourable conditions for democratic life, but they demand that this path be constructed through involvement of the citizenry in public affairs. The massive social participation called for in the peace accords has not occurred with the intensity required for peace.

The national challenges will be met only if the foundations for a true reconciliation among Guatemalans are built, foundations that enable the country to end atomisation and bridge the gulf between the government's agenda and that of society as a whole. It is necessary to create a national project that fully and actively involves the citizenry in creating its own opportunities in social, economic and cultural areas. These must embody respect for the pluricultural and multilingual character of the various groups that coexist in Guatemala. ■

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¹ Coordinadora ¡Sí, Vamos por la Paz! *Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social: Propuesta 2001*. Guatemala, 2000, p. 6.