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ICWA Letters

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Final Thoughts

Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting at The Edith Macy Center in Briarcliff Manor, NY on June 5, 2010.

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What timing. Guatemala has actually been in the news lately. I'm sure many of you saw the photos of the devastation caused by Tropical Storm Agatha, and the eruptions of volcano Pacaya. But for those of you expecting a talk about the enormous sinkhole that formed in Guatemala City, fortunately, we left the country before it happened. But I hear it swallowed a three-story building, a car and a security guard.

It's 65-feet across and 100-feet deep. In this chasm's enormity, I am reminded of the chasm that separates the Guatemalan society. That's what I'd like to talk to you about tonight, about the divided country that is Guatemala.

It is divided on the lines of class and race. And like the sinkhole, the divisions are deep. They are so deep, that for many it feels as if there are two countries.

One of the Guatemalas is very poor. In it, children starve to death. People are being murdered with impunity. And farmers struggle.

The other Guatemala is rich. It controls industry. It benefits from economic reforms. And it has a strong say in what happens in the government.

Now, before my move to the country one of the first things I read was the Nobel Prize acceptance speech delivered by Rigoberta Menchu. Menchu, as many of you know, is an indigenous Mayan whose family was massacred during Guatemala's civil war.

Little did I know at the time, but her words would frame my experience in the country.

If it's possible for a speech to leave you both hopeful and pessimistic, hers did. She said that for her the Nobel Prize represented "a tribute to the Central-American people who were still searching for their stability, for the structuring of their future, and the path for their development and integration, based on civil democracy and mutual respect."

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Later, she said she could not take the prize home. She was living in Mexico at the time and she described the brutal conditions under which the majority of Guatemalans lived: poverty was widespread; people were being killed at an alarming rate; the government seemed to operate for the sole purpose of benefitting the country's elite.

And even though the civil war fighting had largely ended, she said, "Impunity and terror continues to prevent people from freely expressing their needs and vital demands."

"The internal armed conflict," she said, "still exists."

That was December 10th 1992. Sixteen years and six months later, I stood in Guatemala City's big, open central plaza and wondered if anything had changed.

It was midday in May 2009 and the country was in a state of political crisis.

I had been there since morning talking to protestors. To one side, city residents — members of the country's elite — were dressed in white

and had set up an enormous stage with booming speakers. They were calling for the president's resignation.

On the other side of the plaza, thousands of indigenous Mayans rallied in support of the president. Wearing traditional dress, they gathered into small groups, and surrounded a speaker who was screaming about the lies being told about the president.

Oddly enough, the protestors were brought together that day by a dead lawyer. On mother's day, just a few days earlier, the lawyer, Rodrigo Rosenberg, was killed. Before his murder, he recorded a video in which he predicted his own assassination.

"If you are watching this," he said, "it's because I have been murdered by the president and the first lady"

The video left democracy hanging on by a thread.

Street protests are about as common as morning coffee in Guatemala. But these were different. The charge in the air was tangible.

I stood for a while between the two groups. They began to shout at each other and to move toward each other. Soon they were right on top of each other. I was between them and remember feeling, for a fleeting moment, that I was about to be trampled.

Police came through with bullhorns and the groups went back to their respective sides.

But that moment left me with a vivid image of what I had been seeing in Guatemala for the previous year and a half: to one side, indigenous Mayans, clothing tattered, skin leathery from a lifetime of work under the sun. Steps away university students were dressed in their designer jeans and brilliant white shirts. They were children of what seemed like a different world from that known to those Mayan protestors.

Here they were, on this day in that plaza — the two Guatemalas. It was a snapshot of what the country is today.

So what is Guatemala today? It is a country with a population nearly evenly split between indigenous Mayans and Spanish mulattos.

The vast majority of Mayans live in poverty. They try to eke out a living on small farms that have been handed down through generations and continually made smaller. They grow corn and beans and often it's not enough to feed their families. Many of them have migrated to the overcrowded Guatemala City where they live in slums built down the sides of deep ravines.

In the same city, expensive SUVs roll through streets. Hulking new shopping malls are going up, as are dozens of new apartment and condo buildings.

As a foreigner, living there required a certain inner calm. Homes are separated from the street by high concrete walls topped with barbed wire. And the businesses are manned by shotgun-wielding guards.

It's also a country that has yet to come to terms with its past. The 36-year civil war ended in 1996 with 200,000 people killed or disappeared. The vast majority were peasant Mayans. Truth commissions found the military carried out hundreds of massacres in the countryside. And in the city, the police kidnapped tens of thousands of people and tortured them before killing them.

Yet none of the words of the two truth commissions appears in school textbooks. Some seem dismissive of the idea that the war ever took place to the level that it did.

Even the violence that plagues the country today is often dismissed. I've sat through presentations in which the growing crime problem was said to be 'contained' to a few bad neighborhoods. Meanwhile, poll after poll show that crime is the biggest concern for most residents. Some 80 percent of the population has been affected in some way by violence since the end of the war, one poll found.

This is also a country that is controlled by a small group. A small percent of the population earns more than half of the wealth, and owns roughly 70 percent of the farmland.

This same group tightly controls the private sector. A handful of families have monopolies in key industries — everything from beer and fried chicken to sugar production. These families have been known to stamp out competition.

Yet, the government rarely challenges them.

The surnames of these families are known well around the country:

Mention the Castillo family, a family said to have direct lineage to Spanish conquistadors, and the average Guatemalan will respond with "Gallo." That's the national beer and signature product for a family that controls more than 90 percent of the beer market.

Mention Gutierrez. And savvy Guatemalans will know that is the family that controls the fast food chain Pollo Campero. The fried chicken restaurant business might sound like a bizarre thing to monopolize. But it has annual sales of more than $2 billion and employs 28,000 people.

The list of family-held monopolies goes on, from companies that generate electricity to those that distribute drinking water. But it's not a long list. There are some

seven or eight families, depending on how you count, that control everyday products.

This not a new development. A small group has controlled Guatemala for centuries. But it's a power structure that has kept progress at a standstill. There's little incentive for Guatemala to change things when these same families have so much control in the government. There have been small chinks in the armor in recent years.

But are real changes likely to come any time soon? Most of those I spoke to in Guatemala told me "no."

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During my time there, I tried as best I could to approach the country's issues from the perspective of those at the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

I spoke to peasant farmers throughout the country. This is not a small part of the population. We're talking about millions of people living off of small farms. Most shared the same basic concerns: how to feed their families, if the weather was going to cooperate with their harvest, or how to keep sending their children to school.

And no matter where I went — from the jungle-covered Peten near the Mexican border to the north to the arid regions near the southern border — I saw the same thing.

The father would always emerge first, and behind him his several children. They always invited me inside where the floors were always dirt. And the wife was always around an open-air kitchen. Some had electricity, but most did not. None had running water.

And I was always shocked when I talked to the fathers. They were staking their families' lives to their farms, but they often did not know why they were even farming. They'd say, "Well, my father was a farmer, and my grand-

father was a farmer." It was as if they had no choice. And often, they didn't.

They did not know how much money they made year-to-year or how much they were spending. It was hand-to-mouth poverty. Yet, most of these people seemed perfectly content with their lives. A U.S. economist once told me that I had a romanticized perception of the Guatemalan farmer toiling away in his fields. That may be so. And the conditions for these people surely need to improve.

But I always saw happiness in these villages. I always saw a smiling child, even if it was behind a dirty face. It was life that I saw on these farms. But all those farmers shared something that I thought said a lot about the country. They were resigned to their poverty. For them, the idea of conditions improving in their lifetime, or even in the lifetime of their children was inconceivable.

I remember one farmer explaining to me that he didn't think of himself as a Guatemalan. He thought of himself as a peasant. Guatemalans, he told me, were the people who had some say in what Guatemala looked like. He and his children would never have an opportunity to take part in shaping the country, he said. Many like him do not believe their country can, or will, change.

On the first month of my fellowship, I met the first Guatemalan who told me this.

It was January 2007. I traveled through Guatemala's volcanic peaks to the shores of the beautiful Lake Atitlan and a town called Santiago. Santiago is home to about 40 thousand Tz'utujil Mayans and during the civil war it was home to a military base.

I had gone there to try to make sense of Guatemala's past.

Why was it at war for all those years? How had things changed since peace accords were signed in 1996?

I met Domingo Damian, a stocky former guerrilla fighter who had agreed to talk to me about the war. We hiked through the hills around the town as he recounted the helicopters that would spray guerrilla camps with gunfire, the military base where he saw a man electrocuted and the mass graves where the military threw the bodies of peasants killed during massacres.

What I really wanted to know from Domingo, though, was why he made the choice to take up arms. He joined the war in the late 1970s at the height of the fighting. In his mind, he was fighting for a hospital, for better schools, for clean water and electricity. He was fighting, he said, for the government to take notice of its people.

Yet little has changed since he joined the fighters. Jobs are still scarce. Hospitals and clinics are woefully inadequate. Children still die because they don't have clean drinking water. Villages are still without power. The schools provide only a basic education that, for most, ends after the 6th grade.

The result of this country's inability to care for its people is widespread.

My wife, Robyn, still recalls traveling to the country's so called 'dry corridor.' It's a rural area along the southern and eastern borders that experiences drought annually. 2009 was a particularly bad year for the dry corridor. After a weekend of visiting families in one of the dustbowl towns, my wife — who works for a humanitarian aid organization — returned talking about a 2-year-old boy she met.

He sat on a chair in a filthy cloth diaper. He still could not walk or talk. His family had nothing to feed him. It was a moment that resonated because at the time our own daughter, Ruby, was turning one and taking her first steps and speaking her first words.

Ruby is our only child. And she was born in Guatemala. As she's starting to talk, she calls the country "mala," which is kind of funny because that means "bad."

When my wife was pregnant, I felt a little torn for Ruby being born so far from family. But after she was born, I didn't feel torn so much. I felt guilty. We were buying vaccines that cost as much as the nanny's salary. We fed Ruby anything she wanted and yet out in the dry corridor, children were starving.

I traveled to the area a few months later and talked to 10-year-old boys and girls suffering from stunting — caused by a lack of basic nutrition — so severe they looked like 6 year olds. They could not remember the last time they'd eaten dinner. The meals they did have were palm-sized portions of black beans and a tortilla. By the end of last year, 54 children in that area had died.

They starved to death.

I always left these villages with a deep sadness. These were people with less than nothing, who always offered me a plate of food. They had work to do in the field, yet they always took time out to talk to me. They were some of the gentlest people I met in the country. And when I got back from those visits my question for the government and NGOs was always: "How can they be helped?"

One thing I heard repeatedly is that Guatemala should be able to reach many of these people with assistance. Compared to developing countries around the world, Guatemala is not a poor country.

Its gross national income on a per capita basis is around $5,000, and that's on par with middle-income countries around the world. Yet the conditions in those other countries are often much better. In Guatemala last year, when

children were starving to death in the dry corridor the government ran out of money for emergency food rations.

Why? The simple answer is that Guatemalans do not like to pay taxes. I'm not particularly fond of paying taxes either. But Guatemalans really take it to the extreme. The country has one of the lowest tax-collection rates in the Western Hemisphere. And that leaves the government with little latitude to invest in education, in food security, or in health care or any other area

Current president, Alvaro Colom, has tried to push for fiscal reform. The reforms would increase taxes on corporations and individuals. It's a measure that has international support. But a congress that's deeply interwoven with the country's ruling class has blocked his attempts.

Colom was the first candidate to win the presidency while losing the Guatemala City vote. That is to say, he was elected by the poor.

He vowed to fight poverty. And he has instituted programs that give cash and food to families who send their children to school. He made schools free, or as free as they can be: families still need to buy books and uniforms.

But even those programs have been met with resistance.

I don't believe that anyone in Guatemala wants to see children starve to death. And I do think they believe everyone should have access to education and to health care.

But there's a knee-jerk reaction that takes place when someone threatens to challenge the status quo. This is particularly true of a president who was elected by the poor.

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The one major change that was approved in recent years was the Central America Free Trade Agreement. CAFTA was of particular interest to me. It is a trade pact signed between the U.S. and Central American countries more than five years ago. I had strong reservations about CAFTA.

I wondered if the promises of job creation and poverty alleviation were hollow. Or, if the pact was actually making things worse. I wondered if CAFTA really could create the opportunities for Guatemalans that it said it would.

What I found was that yes, it is creating opportunities. Guatemalan exports to the United States and foreign investment in Guatemala are up since CAFTA went into effect. But my real question should not have been whether it was working, but who was benefiting.

Defenders of the trade deal point to the several call centers that have opened in Guatemala City and its suburbs. Here, they say, are the jobs that CAFTA is creating. Guatemalans can answer phone calls placed by U.S. residents with questions on their student loan accounts or catalogue orders. And the salary is not bad — as much as $1,000 for a month's work, if you can get it.

Landing one of those jobs requires the ability to hold a conversation in English. So many have only a tenuous grasp on Spanish — let alone English. This is a country of 22 departments where 23 languages are spoken. I could believe that these jobs are promoting the growth of a middle class desperately lacking in Guatemala. But a few thousand such jobs in a country of 13 million where more than half the population lives in poverty hardly scratch the surface.

Agricultural exports are also up under CAFTA. Sugar is a big one. That's great news for the Herrera family, one of the family-owned monopolies. They are reported to be the largest sugar exporter in Central America.

On the other end of the agricultural spectrum, there are millions of farmers who own just a few acres in remote poor villages, like Jesus Victor. He has a little farm in Totonicapan, a poor department five hours west of Guatemala City that also suffers extremely high malnutrition rates.

He grows corn, mainly to feed his family, on a few acres that sit on a steep hillside. But these days he's finding that it's cheaper to buy his corn than to grow it. The cost of fertilizer and seeds has risen in recent years. The cost of corn, thanks to cheap imports, has dropped.

This is a natural result of CAFTA. The government, in fact, expected that small farmers would be affected. A farmer like Victor can't compete by growing a product like corn. So, he should switch to another product.

For example, the government suggested, he could take advantage of his long growing season by planting a vegetable that Americans will buy. Let's say eggplant.

This is the opportunity that CAFTA has created for Victor. He could sell his eggplant to the U.S. duty free, buy all the corn he needs and have money left over for education, health care and whatever else his children need

But so much is working against Victor. This is a man who has trouble feeding his children. Yet, we expect him to become a player in the global marketplace without any assistance. We expect him to start growing eggplant, even though he's never seen one. We expect him to negotiate the world of commerce with only a 6th-grade education.

This is not CAFTA's fault. I remember speaking with Guatemala's lead trade negotiator for CAFTA last year in a Guatemala City café. He was a sincere man who seemed to have the poor's best interest at heart. And he believed that Guatemala was better off with the agreement than without it.

But even he was disheartened by its results. "It creates opportunity," he said. "The reason it's not working is because Guatemala is utterly unable to provide people

with the tools to take advantage of those opportunities."

In Victor's case, those tools would be teaching him what to plant, how to grow it and how to bring it to market. And somebody might also show him what an eggplant looks like.

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To make matters more difficult, Guatemala has a more pressing task on its hands. Before it can begin to address the long-term problems in the fields of Totonicapán, it needs to bring stability to its streets. It needs to establish rule of law.

Last year, 6,451 people were murdered. That gives the country a homicide rate roughly 800 percent higher than that of the United States. It's one of the most murderous countries in the world. Of those cases, only a few hundred were solved. Ninety-eight percent were not.

The violence today in Guatemala is caused by a mix of street gangs, drug cartels and organized criminal groups. A special prosecutor from the United Nations investigating corruption and organized crime told me that these groups operate for completely different reasons. But they share admiration for one part of life there: impunity. They can commit crime, they can kill and they can do so without fear of being held accountable.

The crime affects Guatemalans across the society. One morning about two years ago, our neighbors, a friendly young couple we used to pass every morning walking our dogs, left to pick up their two children at school. They were shot to death on the road in front of our house. Police said they had reported drug trafficking activity.

For the average Guatemalan, the most visible sign of the lack of security is found on, of all things, the public buses. Between 2006 and the first few months of this year, 512, or 10 percent, of bus drivers, were killed by gangs because they refused to pay extortion.

The extortionists demand the drivers pay about $125 a week in exchange for protection. When the drivers don't pay, they are killed. Those that do pay are left with only $125 a month to feed their families. For years, the government has vowed to investigate and stop the violence. However, they've made only a handful of arrests. Last year was the most violent for drivers. They are survived by hundreds of widows and more than 1,000 children who are growing up without fathers.

There's a law that says these families are entitled to a monthly pension from the government. Hundreds have applied. But only 16 widows have received anything.

Why is this relevant to the rest of what I've talked about?

As some have said, and I would agree, it is extremely difficult for the country to address its structural and long-term problems without first confronting and fixing its failing justice system. It can't build a functioning democracy or economy on a crumbling foundation.

Simply put: the insecurity in Guatemala, the murders, the rampant street crime, the powerful drug traffickers, the corrupt police and courts have left the population in a state of near paralysis.

Fixing this, though, requires a certain political will that has long been lacking.

So where does this leave the country?

As I left Guatemala a few months ago, I thought about what Domingo — that former guerilla fighter — told me. He said, nothing had or will change.

Was he right?

There are clearly signs of physical changes — new shopping malls, a new airport and new office buildings. But it's hard for Domingo, the widows of slain bus drivers, or the farmers trying to survive on the yields of one acre to feel those changes. They are awaiting a change from within Guatemalan society, a time when the country would awaken from its slumber.

Despite Domingo's pessimism, I think that it is possible and that it might be under way, even if only in a small way.

To again quote Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu, she said that she was "convinced that if the diverse social sectors which integrate Guatemalan society find bases of unity, respecting their natural differences, they would together find a solution."

Surprisingly, it is those same protestors that I encountered last May that give me hope for Guatemala's future. Many of those protestors grew up after the end of the war. They are largely free from the dark forces that have plagued the country for so long. And they have shown that they are ready to reach across social, economic and racial divides to change their country.

After that day where the protestors nearly clashed, together, the college students and Mayan groups found focus. They found a common cause. And the aim was not to overthrow the president.

Instead, they sought to challenge the dysfunctional judicial system. For weeks, they rallied for transparency in the nomination and selection process for Supreme Court justices. Those justices are selected every four years through what used to be a secret process.

With public pressure and to the dismay of some Guatemalans, congress changed the law and brought

the process out in the open.

That transparency is important because the justices oversee the appointment of judges at criminal courts around the country. And corruption in those courts is deep rooted. The judges were simply not doing their jobs. The U.N. estimates that between 95 and 99 percent of all crimes go unpunished.

Part of this has to do with ineffective, undertrained and poorly paid police and corrupt prosecutors. But with the help of the United Nations, the police and attorney general's office are being cleaned up. Thousands of police and hundreds of prosecutors have been removed.

The judicial system was the last and seemingly most difficult to tackle. The reforms were supported by various groups — from human rights organizations to student associations. And I truly believe that little would have happened without that public pressure.

A seasoned congresswoman, a woman who has fought corruption since the days her husband was abducted during the war, called this movement "una semilla de esperanza" — a seed of hope.

Whether that movement will continue remains to be seen. But it's certainly a sign of hope for the country. One of the young men in the movement told me his parents had never seen the country come together the way it has recently.

So maybe what I saw that day at Guatemala's central plaza was not the two Guatemalas confronting each other. Maybe what I saw was their coming together. And just maybe what I saw were the seeds of the growth of one unified Guatemala. ❑

Current Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA
May 2008 - 2010

Elena is living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Pooja Bhatia • HAITI
September 2008 - 2010

Pooja attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and then worked for the *Wall Street Journal* for a few years. She graduated from Harvard Law School. She was appointed Harvard Law School Satter Human Rights Fellow in 2007 and worked as an attorney with the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, which advocates and litigates on behalf of Haiti's poor.

Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA
May 2009 - 2011

Eve is interested in societal transformation. She writes about how individuals fit themselves into the new and still-changing South Africa, particularly the Afrikaners. A former staff writer at *The New Republic*, she covered the 2008 presidential race; her book reviews have also appeared in *The New York Times*. She graduated with a degree in political science from Yale, where she also studied music.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA
January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE), a staff writer for *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA) and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA
September 2007 - May 2010

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

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