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Corn and the Campesino

Rising Food Prices Push More Guatemalans into Poverty

By Ezra K. Fieser

SANTA MARÍA, CHIQUIMULA, TOTONICAPÁN – The poorest of poor Guatemalans live here, sleeping on dirt floors surrounded by earthen walls and surviving off what they can grow. It is deep in the heart of Western Highlands, where single-lane dirt roads crawl up and down steep mountains, cutting through thriving pine forests, and past pond-sized potholes filled with yellow-brown mud brought by an unforgiving rainy season. Not even the public buses, roofs packed with chickens and produce, seats overflowing with passengers, travel these roads. It's a quiet quilt of yellow and green cornfields, cut into mountainsides seemingly too steep to be farmed by hand. It is an unlikely place to find the effects of a global economic shift. But the people of places like Totonicapán are suffering from the worldwide run-up in food prices.

The million or so poor farmers who work the remote areas of Guatemala's Western Highlands have long been poor. In Totonicapán, the rates of chronic child malnutrition are higher than

those of some sub-Saharan African countries. A child's chance of dying before the first birthday is one of the highest in the hemisphere. And it's more common than not to earn less than \$1 per day. If it's possible for people in such desperate circumstances to be pushed even further into poverty, it's happening, thanks to the rising costs of food and energy.

"It's just not possible for them to keep up. They could barely afford food to start with. How are they supposed to cope with higher prices?" said Mario Chamalé, who directs the Guatemalan Food Security Program for the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). "We are at the point now where all of their resources, all their savings, are gone."

It defies reason: they are mainly subsistence farmers, feeding themselves with the food they grow. A spike in prices at the market should not matter. And their energy use would make Al Gore blush. Electricity service only came to the



Hillside farms in the department of Totonicapán in Guatemala's Western Highlands.



Guatemala's recent reliance on agricultural imports. What I found, however, was much more complex.

Since signing on to the Central America Free Trade Agreement, Guatemala has seen an influx of U.S. corn and other products. As a result, global ebbs and flows, even in remote areas like Totonicapán, are affecting local markets. But at the heart of the problem for poor farmers is the fact that they have been abandoned by their government. At the behest of the international community, the government dismantled its agricultural support system, most notably eliminating an agricultural extension program, more than 10 years ago. And the programs put in place since are insufficient, ineffective or plagued by corruption.

TO REACH JESUS VICTOR'S HILLSIDE FARM, we took single-lane dirt roads for two-and-a-half hours from the nearest major town, the one-stoplight Totonicapán, the seat of the department with which it shares a name. The SUV's wheels spun in wet dirt patches that spanned the narrow lane. The engine rarely left first gear. At first, I confused the pull off for Victor's house with a roadside patch of grass. The house, which sat crookedly on the hillside 100 feet below the pull-off, could barely be seen from the road.

remote areas of Totonicapán this year. But they are no longer purely subsistence farmers. These days they buy food from the market to supplement their harvests, which are too puny to feed their families. And they depend on chemical fertilizers — made from products sensitive to energy prices — to grow crops of corn because their skills and tools are rudimentary.

Even a small price increase could deplete their meager savings. Instead, prices have jumped. Food prices increased by double digits in each of the last two years. And the cost of fertilizer doubled in a year. The situation is raising fears that farmers will leave their land. Too poor to afford the costly trip to the United States, they instead head for Guatemala City. Rural-to-urban migration has ballooned the city's population. It went from under 1.2 million in the mid-1990s to an estimated 4.5 million this year. A rising crime rate, the proliferation of youth gangs and numerous other social maladies have accompanied, and been partially attributed to, the urban growth.

To meet some of those farmers, I rode in a hunter-green SUV through those pothole-filled streets, past dozens of decrepit roadside shacks, to the isolated farms of Totonicapán, a small department located about six hours west of Guatemala City. I assumed their lives had been made worse by

The property sat below a cliff, which rose imposingly to the right, and above a lush valley of cornfields. In the distance, I saw the road on which we traveled lay out before us, weaving through the mountain tops. Homes clung to its sides at harsh angles, like clay globs that had been dropped from above.

We walked down a path too narrow for human feet, passing under the reaches of Bacon avocado trees. Two scruffy dogs barked and growled and I received a warning that they bite.

Victor's 3-year-old daughter came out first. The mahogany brown Guatemalan soil marked her face. Her chin-length hair was stringy to the point of lumpiness. And her clothes were so dirty that the reds and blues of her skirt could be seen only when its deep folds flung open as she spun wildly to avoid looking at us. The rest was a filth-covered grey. She gnawed on the mouth of a cracked plastic bottle, the label of which, despite having been peeled nearly entirely off, still said "grape drink."

Behind Elena, the youngest of five, sat an L-shaped adobe house and an earthen oven used both to bake pottery and for occasional steam baths. A few chickens roamed in front of the house, inside of which two light bulbs hung



Three-year-old Elena in front of her family's house in Tonicapan.

from solitary wires strung up the wall behind posters depicting Jesus, baby Jesus and the Pentecost. They lit well-packed dirt floors, furnished with wooden chairs so upright they looked like exclamation points on feet, a 12-gear, speed-shifter mountain bike with front shocks, and a leaning wooden bookshelf graced with nary a book.

Victor emerged next, his white cowboy hat discolored from sweat and dirt. His handshake was strong, backed by wide, stubby fingers and closely cropped fingernails packed with a line of dirt.

He led us through a field of neck-high corn, past a rusting chicken coop, to a small vegetable patch. He plucked a dark green zucchini from its stem and flashed an ear-to-ear grin as he held the vegetable, a tad longer and thicker than his daughter's thigh. For Victor, the zucchini represented progress. He said he'd be able to sell it for two quetzales, the equivalent of 30 cents, a small profit that provides a little financial relief.

For as long as Victor could remember, the only thing he grew was corn and beans. He managed to harvest about 200 pounds of maize from the soil every year, thanks to the help of hefty applications of chemical fertilizers. He, like most small farmers in the country, relies on fertilizer because he does not rotate crops. Year after year, farmers plant corn, which draws nitrogen and phosphorous from soil. The soil then needs to be treated with fertilizer to replace those nutrients.

Most years, he'd try to stretch the harvest for the entire year. His wife ground and made tortillas from the grain, providing a filling but nutritionally limited staple. He worked occasional construction jobs, using the cash to buy meat or vegetables at the local market. Some seasons, when the family was in need of cash, he'd sell parts of his harvest to a middleman. Food middlemen do exactly what their name suggests, driving pickup trucks around to farmers, offering cash, and taking the products to distribution terminals and markets where they sell to vendors for a profit. By selling parts of his harvest for quick cash, Victor hit the market with the absolute worst timing. His neighbors and many of the other farmers in Guatemala harvest their corn during the same period, near the end of the rainy season in September

or October. Their products flood the market and the price drops. It's not unheard of for a farmer to sell 100 pounds of corn for less than it cost to grow it.

Poor farmers, like Victor, have long operated hand-to-mouth. As a result, they've spent years in poverty. Every year, they played a guessing game in which they prayed for good weather and bountiful harvests. A bad storm could tear their delicate financial support net. When that happens, they work longer hours or they travel to the coasts to work the giant sugar plantations or to the highland coffee farms, where they are paid by how many backbreaking pounds of coffee cherry they pick. Their children drop out of school after the fifth or sixth grade to help around the house in their father's absence. And the cycle starts anew.

"The system of poverty is so persistent in these areas, like Toto [Guatemalans shorten the department's name] because there is never a way out of it. You are born poor, grow up poor and then your family is poor," Chamalé said. "It is not impossible, but it is extremely difficult for someone to break the cycle."

In fact, poor, rural Guatemalan children have less opportunity to break the poverty cycle than children in all other Latin American countries except Nicaragua, according to a new report by the World Bank. The report measures Human Opportunity Index, that is, the authors say, the



Jesus Victor and his daughter Elena display zucchini.



A group of Mayan Quiche wait for a free health checkup. The boy pictured in front was found to be 10 pounds underweight and referred to the hospital.

likelihood that a little girl can overcome circumstances — including a lack of access to education, lack of running water and sewage, her mother’s race and her father’s salary — to move up the socioeconomic ladder. The researchers found that Guatemalan children living in circumstances often found in the countryside — with four siblings and a daily per capita income of \$1 — are less than 25 percent likely to complete sixth grade, have a 20 percent chance of having proper sanitation, and have a 60 percent chance of having running water. The factors add up to make rural Guatemala one of the most difficult environments for poor children. The report draws the picture of a poor Guatemalan girl living in the countryside with four siblings and parents that earn roughly \$180 month as subsistence farmers — a situation similar to Victor’s 3-year-old daughter Elena. “What are ... the chances [she becomes] a prominent lawyer or a university professor? Not very high, and certainly a lot lower than those of a 6-year-old boy growing up in Guatemala City with two parents in his home, both with a secondary education and a good income, and only one sibling.”

It’s more than just a lack of opportunity that plagues Tonicapán. The poverty rate is 72 percent here, and extreme poverty — at 20 percent — is the second highest in the country.

Malnutrition rates are the highest in the country, with 73 percent of children considered undernourished and 58 percent chronically malnourished. (The rate in Ethiopia is 51 percent.) The hospital in Tonicapán, which most of the department’s residents can’t access because they are so isolated, attends to an average of 10 children suffering from extreme malnutrition each month. It’s not just children who are suffering. Earlier this year, an otherwise healthy neighbor of Victor’s, approaching her 22nd birthday, fell ill. María Odilia died two weeks later of extreme malnourishment, one of 25 people from the area to die from malnutrition in a year.

Destitute conditions were easy to find in the area.

Downhill from Victor’s house, Reina Maribel Osorio sat in a wobbly white plastic lawn chair and breast-fed her infant daughter, the youngest of three children. Osorio was the epitome of poor. Her children, and those of a neighbor, played in her home, which consisted of facing dirt-floored shacks, enclosed on three sides with a fourth side open to a shared fire pit. Even in sub-tropical Guatemala, homes at more than 8,000 feet above sea level can be cold at night. The children looked undersized for their age, but smiled frequently, like children should.

Osorio’s face was battered from sun that burned even during the rainy season and streaked with deep lines. Her awkward overbite, made visible the one time she smiled, pushed her entire jaw forward, giving her mouth a strained appearance. Her belly slightly protruded beneath her skirt like a pregnant woman just starting to show. She wore life like a woman in her early 40s. She was, in fact, 25.

Like Victor’s, her life has always been a day-to-day fight to feed her family. For both, and most other peasant farmers in the country, it has become more difficult due to food prices.

“For some things, it costs double today,” Osorio said. “You can’t. I can’t pay that much. It’s too much.”

“What type of things?” I asked.

“Everything. Things that are basic. Eggs. Beans. The corn. All the things we eat, they’re too expensive. A few pounds of sugar always have cost 5 Quetzales. Now it costs 13.”

Neither Osorio nor Victor has any idea why the prices are so high. They both return to the market day after day, hoping to find prices have dropped. They haven’t. Instead, they buy what they can. Osorio uses the money her husband earns working whatever jobs he can find, usually construction work. Fertilizer has become too expensive to buy, so she goes without, trying to substitute the waste from the two pigs she is raising. It’s not the same, she said.

The money her husband earns used to be enough to buy chicken meat to eat at a few meals per week. Now it’s one day, if the prices are right.

Last year, Osorio began caring for the crops and the children, despite the fact that she has a newborn. Her husband left in search of work six days a week. She did not want to talk of the effect it has had on her family. The indigenous people of Guatemala are machismo, I have come to learn, and for a woman like her to talk out of turn about her family would be shameful.

Victor’s situation is slightly different. “I can’t grow enough for all of us for the entire year,” the 48-year-old

Quiche Mayan said. “I don’t have enough land and I don’t have the tools.” He is aware that soon the meager patch of zucchini and other vegetables, a 7-foot by 7-foot square, and the small income it generates, will be sold; and the 200 pounds of corn will be eaten. And then, he said, there will be days when three-year-old Elena goes hungry.

Every year, Victor, Osorio and the roughly 1 million subsistence or near-subsistence level *campesinos* (peasant farmers) try to survive on small harvests of beans and corn. Saddled with undersized, often rented, plots of land and rudimentary farming skills and tools, they can’t grow enough to feed their families. And lately, when they turn to their local markets to buy food — using small savings earned working temporary jobs — their money isn’t stretching like it used to. Prices of food and supplies farmers need to grow food, after remaining affordable and stable for years, have exploded.

Guatemalans refer to their basic necessities — including corn, beans, milk and 23 other products that supply the basic nutritional requirements for a family of five for one day — as the *canasta basica* or basic basket. The price of the basket had long held steady around 43 Quetzales (about US\$5.30 depending on the exchange rate) per day. But it began to spike about two years ago. From July of 2006 to July of 2008, the price of the basic food basket rose 26 percent to Q64.72 (\$8.75) per day, according to the Guatemalan National Statistics Institute. Adding other basic necessities, such as health care and housing, the price is Q118.11 (about \$15.96) per day (it also rose 26 percent from July, 2006 to 2008). For many of the subsistence or near-subsistence farmers, such as Victor, the average daily salary is Q45, according to the UN’s World Food Programme, meaning they have had to cut back on the amount they eat and things they buy.

Although the *canasta basica* is the most widely used yardstick for monitoring food prices, most poor Guatemalans cannot afford many of the products. Instead, they rely on a few staples, mainly corn and the tortillas made from it. The UN estimates that poor Guatemalans get as much as 77 percent of their calories from corn products. During the past two years, the price of the grain has risen faster than the price of other food. From 2006 to 2007, it jumped 60 percent to roughly 18 cents from 11 cents per pound. The price stabilized in 2008 at the equivalent of 15 cents per pound, but some economists expect it to rise again as domestic production remains flat. Other staples have also seen a run-up. The price of rice, most of which is imported in Guatemala, has risen 101 percent since 2006. And the price of beans, found on breakfast and dinner plates across the country and required for a reasonably balanced diet, has gone up 48 percent.

Several Latin American countries have seen similar spikes. Nicaragua, for instance, watched food prices rise 33.3 percent from July 2007 to 2008, according to the United Nations. The rises in prices are pushing millions more into desperate circumstances. Across Latin America, the increase in prices is expected to drive 26 million more people into

extreme poverty, according to the Inter-American Development Bank. Already, 47 million residents live in such conditions, according to the World Bank.

In Guatemala, the increase is estimated to have already affected 1.2 million people. Roughly 500,000 of them, according to a study by the UN’s World Food Programme, are now considered to be living below the poverty line as a result of the rising cost of food. Another 500,000 are now living in extreme poverty, the study said. The other 200,000 are struggling to purchase food. The rising price of food between 2006 and 2008 single handedly has pushed the poverty rate from 51 to 56 percent and the rate of extreme poverty from 15 to 19 percent. The study’s results are not likely to show up in official poverty statistics, which are based on the amount earned by a household and do not take into account spikes in food prices.

“The poorest people have a diet the least varied diet, consisting of basic grains, beans, rice and corn,” said the author’s study Nicholas Virzi. “And the inflation in food prices has been concentrated in precisely these grains.”

Among poor farmers, the problem has been acute for several reasons, chief among them is the fact that the sizes of their farms are too small to grow enough food to feed their families, meaning they have to supplement what they grow with purchases on the market.

The country has enough land to grow all the corn its people need, according to Institute of Agrarian Studies at



Reina Maribel Osorio with two of her children in front of her corn field.

CONGCOOP, a non-governmental organization that studies economic changes and the effects on the agricultural sector. A study conducted by the organization found 1.3 million acres of land fit for cultivation sits idle. It could produce 895,550 U.S. tons of corn, more than the country imports.

Until the 1985, Guatemala — where some 400 varieties of corn were once grown — was self-sufficient, growing all the corn its population needed and enough extra to export to other Central American countries. It was known as the granary of the region. As a result, the market was insulated from global peaks and valleys. Today, Guatemala is importing more corn than ever, around 750,000 tons, mostly from the United States. And the price has been more erratic than ever. What changed in the last 20 years? The Guatemalan government's priorities shifted. The importance of agriculture was downgraded.

IN DECEMBER OF 1996, THE GUATEMALAN government and members of guerilla forces signed a series of peace accords that brought to an end a 36-year civil war that killed or forced the disappearance of at least 200,000, mostly indigenous Mayans. The international community hailed the signing of the accords as an important moment. A Nobel Prize was awarded as a result. And the country was brought into the international spotlight.

The peace accords also finalized and codified a dismantling of many government-run institutions and programs. The national phone company — so expensive and exclusive that few people had landline service — was opened to private contractors. Today, it is Telgua, a company that also owns the cable television system, the largest Internet service provider and one of the largest cellular phone companies. The financial services sector went through a modernization process, which gave rise to an extremely competitive and modern banking system. And numerous other services formerly provided by the government were outsourced. It was all done at the urging of international organizations, such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. In several instances, the banks attached a requirement of privatization to development loans or interest rates.

By the time the Central America Free Trade Agreement came along, the changes — known as structural adjustments — were already in place.

Food prices already started to increase before the free trade pact went into effect. But CAFTA has, as intended, brought more imports from the United States to Guatemalan store shelves and markets. As a result, the agreement is an easy target in the assignment of blame. Throughout the region, groups in opposition to the agreement have organized marches and demonstrations against it. Costa Rica has delayed its entry into the agreement, failing to pass laws needed to meet terms of the agreement. The country was granted a three-month extension in September. In Guatemala, where demonstrations are less frequent than they once were, the words "NO TLC" [the acronym for CAFTA

in Spanish] can still be seen on walls in Guatemala City with messages about food security.

The pact has clearly made Guatemala more dependent on imports. From 2005, the year before the pact went into place, to 2007, Guatemala's imports of cereals — mainly wheat, corn and rice — from the United States increased 93 percent, reaching a record \$273 million worth of goods last year, according to U.S. trade data. The number is projected to climb an additional 29 percent this year over 2007. Guatemala is heavily dependent on imports of basic grains. Last year, the country imported 55 percent more of the products than it grew.

The signing of the CAFTA encouraged trade by reducing or eliminating tariffs on agricultural — and other — products (80 percent of which Guatemala could export duty free even before the agreement was signed). While often blamed for eroding the country's ability to feed itself, CAFTA simply put the finishing touches on changes already place.

In terms of agriculture and the country's food security, the structural reforms that began in the 1980s and the 1990s opened the country to an import-export system. "CAFTA, and free trade agreements in general, have just been the icing on the cake. The real damage, in terms of food security and for countries to be insulated from the effects of global peaks in prices, were the structural reforms," said Eric Holt Gimenez, director of the Institute for Food & Development Policy / Food First, an Oakland, Calif.-based think tank that analyzes questions related to food sovereignty.

Structural adjustments were designed to open economies in developing countries. In theory, they were supposed to increase efficiency by modernizing countries. They shunned agriculture in favor of low-tech manufacturing. They sought to do away with large governments, allowing the price sector to take their places. In his book "The End of Poverty," noted economist and author Jeffrey Sachs said "rich countries told the poor countries: 'Poverty is your own fault. Be like us (or what we imagine ourselves to be — free market oriented, entrepreneurial, fiscally responsible) and you, too, can enjoy the riches of private-sector-led economic development.'"

In some countries, the reforms ushered in eras of prosperity. In others, however, they eroded needed governmental programs. The problem was that the banks took a one-size fits all approach to each country, failing to account for a country's particular situation. "Belt tightening, privatization, liberalization and good governance become the order of the day. ... A multifaceted approach did not enter the policy debate until very recently. Sadly, there were self-serving and ideological aspects of the structural adjustment era's failures of advice and insufficient help." Sachs wrote.

The World Bank is clear about its missteps. In its 2008 World Development Report, the bank writes "Structural adjustment in the 1980s dismantled the elaborate system of public agencies that provided farmers with access to land, credit, insurance, inputs, and cooperative organizations. The expectation was that removing the state would free the

market for private actors to take over these functions—reducing their costs, improving their quality, and eliminating their regressive bias. Too often, that didn't happen. ... the private sector emerged only slowly and partially—mainly serving commercial farmers but leaving many smallholders exposed to extensive market failures, high transaction costs and risks, and service gaps."

In Guatemala, among the government programs dismantled was the Ministry of Agriculture, Grains and Food's agriculture extension apparatus, which provided technical assistance and helped small farmers access credit. The program was said to be horribly corrupt.

But for poor farmers, dropping the program was perhaps the most detrimental of the government's decisions, Chamalé said. "Despite being corrupt, it was an enormous program and was able to provide much assistance to farmers," said Chamalé, who has worked in the government's ministry of agriculture. He said agriculture extension officers were hands on, delivering advice about irrigation systems, planting seasons and how to sell produce to the market to turn a profit. When the program was dismantled, "the lack of help, of support, made it more difficult for farmers to survive. People actually abandoned their farms and went to work for the service sector. ... The farmers that remained are suffering, trying to survive."

In Totonicapán, according to government agricultural censuses, the amount of land being farmed actually dropped between the 1980s and early 2000s by 23 percent, despite the fact that the population had nearly doubled. There were 395,324 people living in the department, according to the 2006 census. According to that census, there were also more poor people living in Totonicapán in 2006 (284,059 or 72 percent of the department's population) than the department's entire population in 1981 (204,419). The government did not categorize poor people before the most recent count.

"Campesinos in Guatemala have been poor for a long time. The trouble is now it's more than poverty. The prices of food are rising; they have no help from their government. They have been abandoned. It's not about poverty anymore. It's survival," said Susana Gauster, director of the agriculture research arm of CONGCOOP.

The private entities that have emerged in the wake of the government's pullout have focused on medium- and large-sized farms, she said.

Gauster said the situation has become so difficult that many small farmers are considering leaving their land. She said for those producers who depended on selling their products to the market and using the cash to buy food, the cost of cultivating a manzana of land — roughly 1.75 acres — is

the equivalent of \$628. They can sell the harvest, usually corn, for an average of \$648. The \$20 in profit is not enough to cover any emergencies or extra costs. But if the farmer does not own his land, as is often the case, they must pay an additional \$135 or so in rent, meaning they are actually losing money. Because the small producers sell through a system of middlemen, she said, they are not able to capitalize on the rising prices of food. Those benefits have fallen to medium- and large-sized farms, which have direct access to national and export markets.

"We're seeing the situation getting worse for campesinos as a result of the food crisis and Guatemala's dependency on imports," Gauster said.

THE DRIVE TO THE INNER REACHES of Guatemala reveals a lot about how the government is helping its poor farmers. The dirt roads, at times dotted with rocks or tree limbs downed from roadsides during heavy rains, look like they haven't been touched in years. No buses pass the roads. Services don't exist here. In a word, the farmers of the region are isolated.

"Nobody from the ministry (of agriculture) has ever come here," Victor said. Behind him, simple tools hung in a dark corner like old bowling trophies: a rake with a broken prong, a spade and a rusted hoe.

The government does have programs aimed at helping poor farmers. And the Ministry of Agriculture says it is developing a new plan to alleviate the impact of the global food crisis.

But the programs that have been put in place so far are woefully inadequate.

One of the programs put in place after the signing of the



An isolated family home in the department of Totonicapán.

peace accords sought to change the land distribution system that has left many poor farmers working undersized or rented plots. The country had one of the most inequitable distributions of land in the world. The international community urging Guatemala to take action often cited the 1979 agricultural census. It showed that 65 percent of the agricultural land was owned or controlled by 2.5 percent of the population, farmers who had large plantations, averaging nearly 500 acres. Meanwhile, 88 percent of farmers, mostly poor, worked just 16 percent of the land, on average plots of 2.5 acres. In the hemisphere, only Colombia was worse. The inequitable system of land distribution dates back to colonial times when large tracts of farmland were granted to the ruling class.

The Fondo de Tierras initiative was intended to give poor Guatemalans a pathway to land ownership or to renting additional plots. The program, which provides credit to get the land and technical assistance to farm it, is limited to families who earn less than \$625 a year and have no land or only small plots.

The government points to the program as proof that it is assisting farmers and that it is focused on poverty reduction. The program says it has helped tens thousands of families — often organized as cooperatives — access hundreds of thousands of acres of land that was not being used. It does so by negotiating deals to buy or lease land from large landowners. The group also says it has provided millions of dollars in technical assistance. But an extensive review of the program said it was failing. “There are a number of reasons why *Fondo de Tierras* is failing. The first is the absence of clearly defined and legally recognized property rights,” the study, authored by Gauster and Byron Garoz, said. Other problems included the organization’s small budget, a cumbersome and lengthy application process and a general lack of knowledge about the program.

Even those who ultimately received land through the program often failed to turn it into a productive farm. The program did not include a process for the farmers to access the credit markets after they received the land. As a result, they could make little investment in the plots and would often end up abandoning them. The technical assistance programs offered by Fondo de Tierras were also found to be ineffective. With no oversight, private companies carrying out the work functioned “according to business transaction ethics and not for social benefit,” the study found.

In total, the study concluded that in year 2006, the most recent for which data was avail-

able, the program was able only to meet 1.16 percent of the total requests from clients. As a result, there has been little change in the way land is divided. In 1998, the most recent year an agricultural census was undertaken (the government is in the process of conducting a new census), 96 percent of producers cultivated 20 percent of the arable land and lived in subsistence conditions, according to the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time 2 percent of producers cultivated 70 percent of the land, with their products — sugar, coffee and bananas, among others -- mainly geared at the export market.

Other programs that were instituted to help small farmers have failed just as miserably.

With the price of widely used chemical fertilizer spiking, the government invested the equivalent of \$24.7 million into Profer, a program it launched in 2000 to distribute bags of fertilizer to small farmers at heavily subsidized rates. In 2008, the program was supposed to reach 1.4 million small producers, selling bags of fertilizer for around \$11.50. The retail cost is as much as \$41.

On August 14, the country’s top investigator told the Public Ministry, which prosecutes cases, that the fertilizer distribution program was riddled with corruption. The numbers of successfully served clients the Ministry of Agriculture claimed were inflated, Sergio Morales, the investigator, said, and that charges should be brought against 14 employees responsible for irregularities in the distribution process. The Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos, the office that Morales controlled, interviewed hundreds of farmers to gauge the effectiveness of the program. It found that more than half of those farmers knew of cases in which fertilizer had been sent to other farmers who did not have a need. And 90 percent of the farmers said the program didn’t provide the quantity they needed.

“If you were to ask me what the biggest problem is in terms of helping poor farmers, I’d tell you that it is these programs that suffer from corruption,” Chamalé said. “It is so widespread and so deeply ingrained that it affects nearly every program we have. Even where there are good people, they are surrounded by corrupt people. It’s a huge problem.”

Today, Victor and Osorio receive some assistance from the church, but it’s hardly enough to change the situation.

“There is no government here,” Victor said. “They have left us to try and survive.” □

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