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When I arrived in Guatemala I was extremely excited because it would be the first time that I would be able to spend an entire week in another country. Before my family went on seven day cruises and the experience of being in other countries was limited to just mere hours and I was never able to capture the full experience of actually being there. I knew this trip would be amazing, so my heart was pounding with excitement with every step I took through the Guatemalan Airport. I have to admit that it felt amazing to walk through the airport doors and to see Gabe with a camera recording our first steps out of the airport and our In-Country guide Alex standing with a SAGE sign. I felt so grateful to have such a warm welcome and the opportunity to be reunited with my SAGE family. There was such a great atmosphere, and I knew from that very moment that I would absolutely love this trip.

As Alex drove us from the airport to the hotel, one of the first things I noticed was how eerie and dead the Capital of Guatemala was at night. Now by night I mean it was barely Ten pm, back in my city the night life for Memphians usually just begins around that time. I figured that Guatemala’s night life businesses like bars, clubs, movie theatres and restaurants would continuously pump in revenue from tourists and its own population. So one of my first questions to Alex was simple “Why was the city so dead?” His answer confirmed my first suspicion that the cause was the extreme violence inside Guatemala, especially at the Capital. Before this trip I had did some preliminary research on some of the leading issues in Guatemala and the violence was definitely among them. But to actually see its’ effect than to read it was mind blowing. The violence is such a problem and fear for the country that the locals follow a general curfew to close their business and to end their activities after sundown. I thought to myself that during the forty-year long civil war in Guatemala, the mass majority of people would not be out late. During most times of war, a curfew is usually placed on the inhabitants to prevent the army from misidentifying the locals as enemy troops using the cover of darkness to maneuver or set ambushes. But that war ended almost twenty years ago, so what knew faction could be causing such a reaction from the locals? That is when Alex informed me that “a large social phenomenon occurred after the civil war.” It was the rise of many violent gangs and drug cartels that sprang up throughout the country and terrorized the locals. Many of the gangs and cartels extorted the locals and swayed the youths into joining them with the promises of money. They instilled fear into the population and their influence was strong enough to create corruption in the police and government. All of this hit me at once during our hour and half ride to the hotel. It made sense to me but it was still shocking to be able to see the real impact on the streets with my own eyes rather than observing the figures and statistics on a computer screen.

Once we arrived in the city of Antigua, also known as the Tourism Capital of Guatemala, there were small signs of an active night life but by that time it was actually getting late. The next morning was more of a shock and exposure to the interesting the culture of Guatemala. One of the first things was the hotel itself. Unknown to me the previous night, the hotel was an open-air hotel with half a roof. It was a unique design, instead of having a sunroom; you could just build half of a roof with a balcony on top. But moreover as we walked from the hotel to a restaurant for breakfast, I was able to see the culture of the Guatemalan people by observing their interactions and the general attitude of the locals. The area had a warm aura surrounding it and the interesting architecture of the buildings further added to my exposure to the culture. I noticed a lot of small shops filled with various items each one mostly consisting of chips, drinks, gum and snacks. Its equivalent back in the states would be that of your typical corner store with some basic grocery items like bread and fruits. The stores in Guatemala were really small so everything was tightly packed, and there was not a single empty row. The more we walked we came across fruit stands and street sellers. Now Guatemala has an overwhelming amount of street sellers that target tourists with a variety of items like flutes, beads and bracelets. Most of the sellers have the exact same merchandise as the other so diversity among the products was hard to find but I can imagine it is harder for the sellers to outdo all of their competition when they all have the same product. This made it hard to determine which items were genuinely handmade. An old woman would offer you a beautiful blanket that she claims to have made herself but just down the street a younger salesman would have the exact same blanket for sale. Each of these of street sellers has to make that hustle so they will do whatever sales strategy works best.

The street sellers, small shops and, of course the restaurants, were my first exposure to the real economy of Guatemala, because I believe that it is really those small shops and street salesmen that are what really sets the foundation of the economy. Instead of just reading about the economy from the government and large businesses, along with other top companies that play a large role in Guatemala’s economy, I can see where the real money is made by locals for their families and not from the individuals that control the majority of the profits made in the country. I was able to see how the locals that are in lower class make their daily money unlike the consistent salaries that the higher class enjoys. More questions popped into my mind about some of the major industries in Guatemala and the tour we took at the fair trade coffee plantation.

If you look at the export statistics, coffee is one of the largest exports and plays a major role in Guatemala’s economy. The country has a rich environment for the coffee plant to thrive and allowing for mass productions of the coffee bean plant. This factor along with its value to the world market makes it an extremely important crop to Guatemala. This makes coffee a big business for Guatemala and it provides a great number of jobs for the locals. A lot of companies take advantage of locals that are desperately looking for work. The companies can use that desperation to make them settle for the low payments for work on the plantation. The workers can barely, if not at all, support their families with such low pay. By cutting corners on proper pay and work conditions, companies are able to pocket large profits without having to properly disburse it to its workers.

Now a farm that’s acquired the fair trade title is one that provides their workers with the proper amount of pay and suitable working conditions. This allows the workers to have a better chance at providing for their families. Not only is it good for the workers but also having the fair trade symbol is better for business marketing. Unfortunately the process to get the fair trade title is not that easy. The process requires companies to really invest in their workers and infrastructure. For some companies this can prove to be too expensive especially for farms that are just starting up. So in turn many farms would rather just cut corners to either save the money or pocket it themselves.

After returning from the trip to the farm, my mind was brought back to all the small shops I saw on the way there. I knew microfinance could play a big part in helping many of those entrepreneurs achieve financial success with their businesses. Namas das was a great example of microfinance in Guatemala. The organization has a unique a way in which it handles its microfinance loans. Based on the notion that women will take their profits and invest deeply into their families, Namas das only loans to women. But not just to any woman off the streets, Namas das puts all its female candidates through a series of training evolutions, to increase its candidates financial and business literacy. Each of the training evolutions that female candidates complete decreases the chances in which the candidates default on their loans. This method also empowers the women of Guatemala by giving them the useful knowledge to expand their business and more importantly the ability to pass on this fortune to their families. This can help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Another microfinance organization is Adigua, but unlike Namas Das, Adigua targets the indigenous population of Guatemala. In an effort to combat the discrimination against the indigenous groups in Guatemala, they focus heavily on building close-knit relationships with their candidates. By having such a strong bond with the communities, Adigua is able to use this as a way to ensure their candidates business success. Adigua field workers are able to attain this type of relationship through frequent in-house visits to their candidates.

During my visit there was one organization that was able to hit an all-around mark for combating poverty for the indigenous population of Guatemala. This organization is known as Mayan Families. Now Mayan Families is able to offer a wide variety of services that include education, health and welfare for its clients. Their education program is mostly free for the majority of the children except for the basic supplies like pencils etc. Each child’s sponsor pays the costs through donations. A sponsor could be any individual that has a desire to help further the education of the many unfortunate children from grades K-12. The child’s education won’t always just end after high school. The child has a chance of getting a university sponsor to pursue higher education. The Family Aid or “welfare” portion of Mayan Families is made up of a host of programs that include a medical, dental, and even an optometrist’s clinic. These wide varieties of programs are free to all the clients in Mayan Families. The welfare portion allows clients access to food security. Also included is a program to educate the adult clients on safe foods to combat the malnutrition in the children of many families.

After witnessing all the great microfinance programs and the efforts to regulate commercial coffee business through the fair trade program, the question remains as to why there is still such severe poverty in Guatemala. From the all information I was able to gather it can be narrowed down to intergenerational poverty caused by four factors: violence, lack of education, poor infrastructure and corruption. Each one of these factors can be tied together. The violence as I mentioned before is so strong that it hinders the progression of many business after dark and even during the day as well. Gangs and drug cartels can force families into paying extortion as a form of tax on their local businesses. Education for young kids is quite often prioritized lower than the child working out in the fields to help support the family. Many kids drop out of school because of this and some families cannot afford to send their children off to school. Both create a cycle for that family’s generation to be held back from progression because their children are not educated and end up taking the same low paying jobs their parents have.

The poor infrastructure prevents many of the indigenous population from reaching many critical resources and therefor it keeps them in that cycle of intergenerational poverty. Corruption in the government and in the big businesses is a major factor because the uneven distribution of the profits made by big business really hurts the hard local workers. As long as those big businesses give some of the profits to politicians and government officials, there won’t be any sign of reform on the greedy business practices.

Overall it was an amazing trip that really was an eye opener because I was able to witness severe poverty in third world country. The experience is something that I will always carry deep in my heart and it’s imprint will always last in memory.