



Inequality in Latin America

In this lesson students read about how colonialism in Latin America, and in particular in Guatemala, resulted in economic and social inequalities that are still reflected in contemporary Latin American society. They then discuss the prevalence of poverty in Guatemala and what it means to live below the poverty line.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Explore how struggles of indigenous peoples in Latin America fit into the historical context of colonialism and independence.
- Read about inequity and contemporary civil conflict in Guatemala.
- Define “poverty” and discuss what it means to live below “the poverty line.”

Content Standards:

Geography

- Places and regions
 - Analyze the physical and human characteristics of places.
 - Discover how people create regions to interpret earth’s complexity.
- Human systems
 - Learn how the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of earth’s surface.

Language arts

- Read a wide range of texts to build an understanding of the cultures of the world.

Materials:

- “Inequality in Guatemala”
- “Living below the poverty line”

Preparation:

Assign students to read the article “Inequality in Guatemala” before teaching this lesson.

Procedure:

1. Identify geographic locations on a world map.

Have your students locate the following places on a world map:

- Guatemala.
- The three countries that border Guatemala (Mexico, Belize, and Honduras).
- The reaches of the Mayan Empire at the height of its power.
- The region of Latin America.
- Spain.

2. Discuss the history of colonialism in Latin America focusing on Guatemala.

The article “Inequality in Guatemala” has questions printed that address the larger context of colonialism in Latin America. Start discussing the article by addressing these questions. The discussion will help students understand some of the general background about colonialism. While the information in this article is specific to Guatemala, it reflects the general economic and political history of Latin America as a whole. Thus, discussion of the article provides you with an opportunity to use the information about Guatemala as a common example of the Latin American experience under colonialism.

3. Discuss the prevalence of poverty in Central America.

Discuss how poverty is measured. Start by asking students, “What is poverty?” Listen to their responses. Provide them with the World Bank’s explanation of poverty:

What is poverty?

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read.¹

Explain that there are many ways of measuring poverty. The term “**poverty line**” refers to the minimum level of income that a person needs to feed, clothe and

shelter himself or herself in a given country. The World Bank measures how many people in a country live on an equivalent of US \$1 per day and US \$2 per day as one measurement of poverty in a country.

Distribute the reading, "Living below the poverty line." Explain that over 75 percent of the population of Guatemala lives in poverty. Many other countries in Latin

America have similar rates of poverty. This article gives students an idea of the types of problems a majority of people in Latin America face in their daily lives. Read the article aloud in class. Discuss the questions at the end of the article. Explain that in the next few days the class will be examining poverty in Latin America through the issue of substandard housing.

Inequality in Latin America

Where is Guatemala?

Guatemala is a country just south of Mexico that is approximately the size of Tennessee. It is a mountainous country that lies between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, so you can find both mountains and beaches there. Guatemala also has 37 volcanoes, four of which are currently active.



Who lives in Guatemala?

There are three main ethnic groups in Guatemala. About half of Guatemala's population are native, or **indigenous** people. They descended from the Mayan Empire that ruled much of Latin America. These people are referred to either as indigenous people or Mayans. The second largest group of people in Guatemala are Ladinos (also called Mestizos). Ladinos are people who can trace their ancestry to both Spanish and indigenous people. Most of the other people in Guatemala are of European descent, primarily of Spanish blood. The official language is Spanish, although 40 percent of the population speak one of the several Mayan languages.

Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in **Latin America**. The wealth that the country does have is

distributed very unevenly. A small, elite group of people own most of the resources in Guatemala, including the best land for growing crops located on the Pacific coast of the country. The rest of the population earns much smaller amounts of income, with a large percentage earning extremely small amounts each year. In both the cities and rural areas, many families live in poverty conditions. This means that they may live in homes that are overcrowded, have dirt floors and leaky roofs, and may not have electricity or running water.

Colonialism and inequality.

Latin America has many **natural resources**, including lands that are good for growing crops. Guatemala's main products are coffee, sugar, bananas and flowers. Despite this wealth of agricultural production, however, most Guatemalans remain very poor. Over half of the population lives below the poverty line.

Why are so many people in Guatemala living in poverty? One of the main reasons is the unequal spread of wealth and resources. This is the result of the colonial history that is common to all Latin American countries.

Christopher Columbus first set foot in the new world in 1492. His voyage to the Americas set off an effort by Spain to conquer the new world. The Spaniards sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and unwittingly brought diseases that were new to America. These diseases killed almost one third of the indigenous population in many regions of the Americas. As a result, the indigenous people's ability to fight the Spanish conquistadors was significantly weakened. Spain conquered

What does the word "indigenous" mean?

What area is considered to be Latin America?

Where did the name "Latin America" come from?

What are "natural resources?"

Why are natural resources important to a country?

Do you know where the bananas you eat come from?



CAROLINE STARBRID

Indigenous woman in the marketplace.

much of the area now known as Latin America. They set up a system of government that put Spaniards in control of the land and people. They claimed the territories in Latin America as colonies, took the natural resources that they found there, and shipped them to Europe. Under this system, the indigenous people were deprived of their lands and their freedom.

Spain ruled Guatemala for almost three hundred years. In 1821, Guatemala successfully declared independence from Spain. Despite independence, the power structure in Guatemala did not change very much. People of Spanish blood were still in control of the land and the government. Ladinos were next in line in terms of wealth and power. At the bottom of the economic and political system were the indigenous people. The rulers of Guatemala viewed the indigenous culture as inferior to European culture. The government created laws that allowed those of European descent to **exploit** the indigenous people.

Who owns the land?

The wealthy in Guatemala grew rich by growing agricultural products to sell to other countries. In the early 20th century, coffee became Guatemala's largest **export** product. German companies working with wealthy Guatemalans owned most of the coffee plantations. Fruit also became a large **export** crop. The United Fruit Company was a U.S. corporation that owned a vast amount of land in Guatemala that was good for farming (the company later became Chiquita Brands International). Government policies forced the indigenous people to work for little pay on the coffee and banana plantations. These large corporations, however, did not use all the land that they owned. Instead, they only grew their products on a small fraction of the land and left the

rest unused. However, they did not allow the indigenous population to use the remaining land to grow food to feed themselves.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a reform party gained control of the government. This new government tried to change policies in order to improve life for the majority of people in Guatemala, who were very poor. The government spent more money on education and health care and passed laws protecting labor organizations and small farmers. The government also tried to redistribute the land so that even the poor could own some land. In 1950, 2 percent of the population controlled almost 75 percent of the land in Guatemala that was suitable for growing crops.

The government passed a law to redistribute the land. The law would have broken up big plantations, taken away the land that was not being cultivated, and distributed those lands to the poor. The wealthy landowners and the foreign corporations were not happy with the idea of redistributing land. They supported an overthrow of the reform government and successfully prevented the redistribution of the land.



CAROLINE STARBRID

Colonial square in Antigua, Guatemala.

What is a "colony" and what is "colonialism?"

What does it mean to "exploit" something or someone?

What is an "export?"

The civil war

After the overthrow of the reform government, power was firmly back in the hands of the wealthy. Peasants and laborers once again faced discriminatory and repressive laws. Groups of poverty stricken Guatemalans formed guerilla groups to fight with government troops for improved conditions for the poor. This started a period of civil war that lasted over 30 years. During the civil war many peasant villages were destroyed and many Guatemalans were killed and tortured. Hundreds of thousands of indigenous people fled the violence to become refugees in Mexico or the United States.

The end of war

A peace agreement was signed in 1996 to end the civil war. There have been some improvements in life for the poor, but there are still a large number of impoverished people in both rural and urban areas of Guatemala. Today, 75 percent of the population of Guatemala lives in poverty.

What is a civil war?

What does it mean to describe a law as “repressive?”

What is a guerilla group? (The term comes from the Latin word, “guerra,” which means war.)



CAROLINE STARBUCK

Farmland and mountains in Guatemala.

Questions to consider:

1. What evidence can you find in the article to show that wealth in Guatemala was and still is unequally distributed?
2. How is Guatemala's colonial and post-colonial history similar to that of most Latin American countries?

Living below the poverty line

What is it like to live in poverty in Guatemala?

About half the people in Guatemala live on less than \$2 per day. There are many problems that people living in such poverty face, including the following:

Education:

In countries where many people live in poverty, there is generally a high illiteracy rate. That means many people in the country are not able to read and do not have much education. This is because they may not have schools nearby, or because the children need to work to support the family and do not have time to go to school. If you don't get a good education and cannot read, it is difficult to earn enough money to support yourself and your family. In Guatemala, 40 percent of the population is illiterate.

Jobs:

In a country like Guatemala, it is difficult to find high paying jobs. Most people living in rural areas work in agriculture, finding jobs on coffee and banana plantations. They hopefully make at least enough money to feed their families. However, the coffee industry has recently faced serious problems and many people working on coffee plantations lost their jobs.

Nutrition:

People living in poverty are often malnourished. This means they don't eat enough food often because they cannot afford it, and therefore, don't get the nutrients a person needs to be healthy. This makes them more likely to catch diseases, less able to do hard, physical labor, and have less energy to accomplish other tasks.

Health:

People living in poverty are far more likely to get sick than wealthier people due to problems like bad housing and poor nutrition. They also have a harder time getting medical care often because they can't afford to pay for medical care or because they live in a small village in the countryside and the nearest health clinic is several days walk away. It may also be because they do not have

enough education to understand when getting medical care can help prevent or cure a health problem.

Housing:

People living in poverty often live in poor housing conditions. Other terms for this are "sub-standard housing" or "poverty housing." This means the homes are harmful or dangerous in several ways:

- The poor often have last choice of where their homes are located. Thus, substandard housing is often found in dangerous locations, for example in an area where mudslides or floods often occur.
- The physical condition of the home is usually not good. Homes may have dirt floors and leaky roofs and bad ventilation systems.
- In rural areas, people may not have a separate stable for their animals, so the animals have to shelter in the house with them. In many rural homes, the animals live on the first floor and a second floor is built above out of wood where the people sleep. Having livestock animals such as cows and goats living in the same house can lead to sanitation and health problems.
- The homes often have no plumbing. With no bathrooms and no running water in the kitchen, it is harder to keep oneself and the food clean. This makes it easier for bacteria and viruses to stay in the home and infect the people living there.
- The homes often have no electricity. This means there is less opportunity for people to work or study, and there is no heat during cold winter months.
- The homes are usually overcrowded. Large numbers of relatives crowd into small homes. With many people sharing tight spaces, the chance of passing diseases from one person to another rises dramatically.
- The neighborhoods may be considered unsafe. There may be violence in the region and poor neighborhoods usually offer little or no protection from such violence.

Questions about living in poverty in Guatemala:

1. What does it mean to live below the poverty line?
2. How much money do you spend in a day? What does your family purchase? Imagine what it would be like to have only \$2 a day to get everything you need to survive. How would your life be different?
3. List ways in which your home is probably different from that of a substandard home in Guatemala.
4. How are other problems of poverty related to substandard housing? How might better housing help address these problems?