



Community food stores in Guatemala

Families in the Camotan community farm a collective plot of land to help boost the village food reserves.

Guatemala is a middle-income country, yet it has shocking malnutrition rates for children under the age of five. Half of all Guatemalan children are chronically malnourished, which means that they fail to grow to their full potential, both mentally and physically.

A chronically malnourished child is usually short for their age but also more likely to die prematurely, and those that survive are far less able to withstand infections. Deficiency in nutrients in a child's diet also affects their brain and nerve development which leads to lower IQs and poorer performance at school.

The challenges of the mountains

Christian Aid partner Bethania works in the highlands region of Chiquimula inhabited by the poorest and traditionally marginalised Chorti people. The villages are remote and most people live in extreme poverty.

These mountains, meandering along the Copán River basin, are steep and rocky, and it is very hard for people here to grow enough to eat on tiny, infertile plots. There are few jobs here and the land doesn't yield enough food, so many men migrate to find seasonal work on coffee plantations.

In this area, the staple food is maize tortilla, which is low in protein, vitamins and

minerals, and in the hunger months (June – September) this is all the poorest families have to eat. Unsurprisingly, malnutrition among children in this region stands at 62%.

Food stores bridge the hunger gap

Bethania has helped the small-scale farmers of the Chiquimula region to construct food stores – a strong building with a metal roof and strong doors where large metal bins are used to store maize and beans, and small containers hold the seeds of native food crops.

These food stores are a vital resource to the community as in times of hardship, everyone that puts some of their harvest into the store is able to buy back grains at a cheap price. The food stores are administered by a village committee of men

and women and there is also a community plot of land used to grow food for the communal store.

Bethania have also trained local community members to grow crops which can thrive in the mountainous terrain. They have encouraged the growth of native food crops such as amaranth, chipilín, herb mora and at least two species of local ancestral beans. The seeds for these crops are now kept in the food store for the community.

A bumper year

It has been a good year so far with a large amount of food stored. 2015 was a particularly difficult year because of the drought caused by the El Nino South Oscillation. That year, only 2.1 metric tonnes (MT) of maize and 0.2 MT of beans were stored. So far in 2017 the communities have stored 10 times as much – 21 MT of maize and 2.2 MT of beans.

These food banks currently benefit 163 families, but there are 326 other families that Bethania hopes to be able to include in the programme in the future. Christian Aid is now also supporting Bethania to help to train local people in soil and water conservation practices to help them to be resilient to drought and climate change.

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Malnutrition facts and figures

Guatemala has the third highest rate of malnutrition worldwide, and the highest prevalence of malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean.

24% of the population is malnourished.

49.8% of all children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition.

53% of the population lives in poverty, **13%** live in extreme poverty.

69.5% of indigenous children suffer from chronic malnutrition.



Farming the collective land allows families to buy food at a discount price during the hunger months (June to September) or take food as a loan and replace it with future crops.