

# Background Guatemala

**Guatemala**  
→ Inhabitants: 13 million  
→ Capital: Guatemala City  
→ Surface area: 109,021 km<sup>2</sup>

## Guatemala

1996 brought an end to 36 years of Central America's bloodiest civil war. When compared internationally, the fighting was particularly violent. The worst affected population group were the traditionally underprivileged Maya living in the highlands.

15 years of peace failed to bring radical change to the country, and Guatemalan society is basically still the same. With commercial centres and residential areas mushrooming, and luxury cars circulating in the city centre, parts of the capital sport a new look, but in the

sprawling suburbs and in the countryside, poverty and destitution are omnipresent.

The land distribution is as unequal as ever: 2.5 per cent of the population own approximately 65 per cent of the land. Large land owners tend to possess fertile arable land whilst small-holding farmers struggle on inferior plots that are unsuitable for efficient long-term agricultural use. Over 50 per cent of Guatemalans live in poverty.

Neither climate nor soil condition are the reasons for this. In Guatemala, hunger has structural roots. The country has resources, and it is able to produce sufficient amounts of food, but its people are too poor to purchase it. The most fertile farms are used to grow cut flowers and strawberries for export, or African oil palms for biofuel.

Poverty increases violence and every day people become victims of vicious crime. Guatemala has one of the highest crime rates in Latin America.

Most Guatemalans are of indigenous origin. Despite their majority status they are excluded from mainstream society, experiencing repres-

sion. There are 21 different Maya cultures, each having developed a typical independent language and culture. The discrimination of Guatemala's indigenous population is clearly visible in the area of education. The Ministry of Education estimates that at least 50 per cent of ethnic minority children do not attend school, and that most of those who do have to work before and after school hours. Approximately 40 per cent of Guatemala's overall population is unable to read and write.

Decades of armed conflict and civil war have stifled the development of a performing education system. The official teaching language, Spanish, represents an educational barrier, in particular for the various indigenous population groups. Only few government schools offer bilingual classes, and most of them lack funds to ensure good quality teaching. Furthermore, the official curriculum of government schools does not consider the typical cultural situation of rural Maya populations.





## Guatemala | Florencia (18)

Florencia has just completed a practical term teaching first graders. Part of the teaching was delivered in her mother tongue, Mam, which is spoken by 1.1 million Guatemalans. The fact that the school offers bilingual classes is the intercultural component of this PCF project.

Florencia is one of the children who can benefit from your project sponsorship.

## Sponsorship Guatemala: Supporting Maya children through mother tongue teaching

After completing her obligatory schooling in her village, Florencia wanted to train as a nurse. At first her parents would not hear anything of professional education for fear that their daughter – like many young Guatemalan women – would have to quit because of family responsibilities. They also did not like the fact that the closest nursing school was hundreds of kilometres away in Cobán.

Finally Florencia convinced her father to allow her to study. However, in order to be closer to her family, she decided to enrol in a teacher training course at an institute run by our partner organisation in Pueblo Nuevo.

Florencia is in her last year of training. She would very much like to continue her education and study medicine as this would be more in line with her original professional dream. «My community needs me,» she says.

Our projects in Guatemala focus on intercultural education and on improving relationships between different ethnic groups.

We work towards strengthening the cultural identity of young Mayas and raise their awareness of their rights. Our activities seek to facilitate their exchange with non-indigenous populations and assist them in their claim for recognition and autonomy. Curricula and teaching materials include reference to local

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«My community needs me.»

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traditions and skills as well as information on Maya culture and history. Only people who know and appreciate their own culture are able to be open towards different cultures. Culture-sensitive teaching strengthens self-confidence, gives new impulses to shaping future society and lays the foundation for peaceful intercultural cohabitation.

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### What can my sponsorship of projects in Guatemala achieve?

Your sponsorship provides young people belonging to Guatemala's poorest with access to bilingual secondary education. We train bilingual teachers in intercultural teaching methods and raise their awareness about Maya integration. Their linguistic abilities and specific teaching competencies are important contributions to peace education.

- 90 francs a year pay for the development of local teaching materials.
- 180 francs a year help finance local teacher training.
- 360 francs a year pay for the development and introduction of curricula.