



AMERICAN
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SERVICE



PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUATEMALA

OUR MISSION

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by advocating for U.S. and international policies to achieve justice and equality worldwide.

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala is a country of striking natural beauty and cultural diversity—distinguished by its volcanic mountains and rolling valleys, and home to an array of indigenous communities mostly descended from the ancient Mayan civilization. It is also a nation recovering from a brutal armed conflict, in which the Guatemalan army systematically terrorized, tortured and murdered more than 200,000 people—most of whom were indigenous—using a strategy many human rights groups have described as genocide.

The country's wounds are still evident 20 years since the war ended. Government corruption is widespread; organized and violent crime are prevalent; and more than half of the population lives below the poverty line¹—particularly indigenous people and women. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Guatemala's wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small group of high-ranking politicians, military leaders and business elites. Individuals who speak out against this inequality or expose human rights abuses risk being harassed, assaulted and even murdered.

AJWS has supported human rights efforts in Guatemala since 2004. Today we fund 24 organizations focused on empowering the country's poorest and most oppressed populations—particularly women, youth, small farmers and indigenous people—to speak up, organize and take the lead in transforming their communities. Against great odds, these groups are working to stop violence and corruption, end discrimination based on ethnicity and gender, and protect rural Guatemalans from threats to their land and livelihoods.

THIS PAGE Volcanic mountains line Lake Atitlán in Sololá. All photographs are by Jonathan Torgovnik unless otherwise noted.

FRONT COVER Miguel Ico Gualna and Concepción Xol Sam hold land titles to their community, which they won with the help of AJWS grantee CCDA in 2019.

¹ The World Bank. "World Bank Data, Guatemala World Development Indicators."


WHERE OUR GRANTEES WORK



AJWS GRANTEES IN GUATEMALA:

- | | |
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| Asociación Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativa | El Colectivo |
| Asociación Civil La Cuerda | El Observador |
| Asociación Consejo de Mujeres Mayas Ixmucané | Festivales Solidarios |
| Asociación de Mujeres de Petén Ixqik | Movimiento de Colectivos de la Región Norte |
| Asociación de Mujeres Q'eqchi'es Nuevo Horizonte | Movimiento de Organizaciones Sociales y Campesinas de Petén |
| Autoridades Ancestrales | Movimiento Social Intercultural del Pueblo del Ixcán |
| Bufete Jurídico de Derechos Humanos | Otra Guatemala Ya |
| Centro de Análisis Forense y Ciencias Aplicadas | Prensa Comunitaria |
| Comité Campesino del Altiplano | Puente de Paz |
| Consejo Nacional de Desplazados de Guatemala | Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala |
| Cooperativa Organización de Trabajadores por la Resistencia y la Autonomía | Unión Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas |
| Coordinadora Departamental de Comadronas Tradicionales de Quetzaltenango | Verdad y Vida |

BACKGROUND: WHY WE SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUATEMALA



Francisca Choy weaves belts in a traditional Mayan pattern at her home in Paguacal, Sololá. Francisca sells her handicrafts and, with the assistance of AJWS grantee CCDA, raises chickens to support her family of four.

The roots of Guatemala's contemporary human rights challenges can be traced back to the 1520s, when Spanish conquistadors first stepped foot on Guatemalan territory with the intention of annexing it to the Spanish empire. But like Mexico to the north, Guatemala was already inhabited by hundreds of thousands of indigenous people, the majority of whom were descendants of one of the ancient world's greatest civilizations: the Maya.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MAYAN EMPIRE

The Mayan civilization began its slow rise to power in 2600 B.C.E. and peaked between 250 and 900 A.D.² At its height, the empire included up to two million people and stretched from the southern-most states of modern Mexico, across Guatemala, to the western reaches of Honduras and El Salvador.

Archaeological sites reveal that the ancient Maya were an advanced people with their own alphabet, calendar and irrigation system, as well as distinctive architecture that includes their iconic stepped pyramids. The Maya spoke dozens of languages and worshipped multiple gods representing the natural world—from the sun and moon, to the rain and corn. Their kings were believed to be related to these gods, giving them special powers. Within this diverse realm, Mayan kingdoms periodically fought one another, vying for territory and control.

The Mayan civilization began to decline in 900 A.D. for unknown reasons; yet many elements of Mayan culture—including its languages and religion—have survived until today, and remain central to indigenous Guatemalan identity.

² Ancient History Encyclopedia. "Maya Civilization Timeline." Ancient History Encyclopedia website. 2009-2016.

COLONIAL CULTURE CLASH AND A NEW NATION IN FLUX

In the early 16th century, Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado divided and conquered the last of the Mayan kingdoms. Notorious for his cruelty, Alvarado slaughtered thousands of Mayan people during his reign and forced thousands more to convert to Christianity in an effort to destroy their indigenous culture.

In the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule that followed his takeover of Guatemala, Spanish colonists formed an elite, ruling class that governed the indigenous inhabitants under a system known as *encomienda*, which was similar to the European feudal system. The ruling class seized large tracts of ancestral lands from indigenous communities and forced the local population to work the land as unpaid laborers in an arrangement that basically amounted to slavery.³

On September 15, 1821, Guatemala declared its independence from Spain. The 140-year period that followed was a tumultuous time marked by a succession of leaders, many of them dictators, who trampled upon civil liberties and sold or gave away large tracts of land to private owners and foreign companies. One of the most pivotal of these leaders was Jorge Ubico, who assumed power in 1931.

Ubico governed Guatemala as a police state. A despot with absolute power, he bestowed special privileges on the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company, which already monopolized the coffee and banana trade and owned all of Guatemala's ports, railroads and communications systems. Ubico exempted United Fruit Company from taxes and gave them 200,000 additional hectares of territory—including land held by rural communities. With Guatemala's farmland consolidating into just a few powerful hands, the majority of the country's farmers became dependent on the low-paying, menial and often dangerous jobs offered by United Fruit, or were forced to work as indebted laborers to the wealthy landowners who owned the rest of the country's arable land.

Ubico took his dictatorship a step too far in 1944, when he suspended the freedoms of speech and the press—echoing the fascist measures taken earlier by Hitler in Germany and alarming the U.S. government and its allies, who were already embroiled in World War II. Determined to maintain their freedom, the people of Guatemala revolted and Ubico fled the country.⁴ In his place, they elected a series of presidents who championed social reforms. One of these leaders, Jacobo Arbenz, passed land reforms offering

pathways for peasants to reclaim farmland held by United Fruit Company and other landowners.

Although Arbenz's policies pleased the beleaguered rural poor, they enraged United Fruit and its American backers and sparked fears in the U.S. that Arbenz was abetting the spread of communism in Central America. President Eisenhower sought a regime change, but to avoid the impression of attacking an ally, he used the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to resolve the situation. The CIA recruited and trained an opposition force that overthrew Arbenz in 1954 and installed a military junta to replace him.

Many elements of Mayan culture have survived until today, and remain central to indigenous Guatemalan identity.

The new government rounded up thousands of leftists and dissenters and executed hundreds of prisoners. It crushed labor unions, which had flourished since 1944; reversed agrarian reforms; and restored United Fruit Company's ownership of the land. Many Guatemalans opposed these brutal tactics and attempted to wrest control from the junta. The junta's leader, Castillo Armas, was assassinated in 1957, and Guatemalan politics erupted into a series of coups and countercoups, coupled with severe repression of the country's people. In 1960, a group of young military officers rebelled. Some of their leaders joined leftist and other political dissidents to form guerrilla groups. These rebels soon launched attacks on the government, igniting decades of civil war.⁵

36 YEARS OF TERROR

According to the UN, during Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict, armed forces killed or disappeared (abducted and likely murdered) over 200,000 men, women and children; 83 percent of these victims were Mayan. The Guatemalan military was responsible for more than 90 percent of these atrocities,⁶ using vicious tactics to suppress dissent—particularly about the use of land. Throughout the war, Guatemalan soldiers systematically attacked rural communities it suspected were supporting the rebels—detaining, torturing, raping and massacring hundreds of thousands of people in the process. In many cases, the victims were peaceful, indigenous farmers with no links to the guerrilla fighters.

³ Minster, Christopher. "The Colonization of Guatemala." About Education. 16 February 2016.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica. "Jorge Ubico: President of Guatemala." 2016.

⁵ Gascoigne, Bamber. "History of Guatemala." HistoryWorld website (accessed 8 April 2016).

⁶ United States Institute of Peace. "Truth Commission: Guatemala." United States Institute of Peace website (accessed 8 April 2016).

One of the most horrific massacres occurred in the 1980s, when the Guatemalan military slaughtered more than 400 men, women and children in an effort to forcibly evict thousands of people to make way for the now infamous Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam⁷—a project backed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. During the same period, Guatemalan President José Efraín Ríos Montt launched a “scorched earth” operation during which soldiers systematically raped, tortured and killed Mayan civilians in 626 villages.⁸ The bloodshed finally ceased in 1996, when the Guatemalan government and guerrilla leaders signed peace accords after several years of bitter negotiations.

SEEKING JUSTICE FOR WAR CRIMES

The fighting is now over, but the armed conflict continues to haunt the Guatemalan people, many of whom are still clamoring for justice. The ongoing legal case against Ríos Montt demonstrates the elusiveness of such justice. Following years of courageous advocacy by human rights defenders and survivors of his attacks, Ríos Montt was finally prosecuted and, in 2013, sentenced to 80 years in prison for crimes against humanity and genocide. Weeks later, the

Constitutional Court—which is controlled by the political and economic elite—overturned the verdict, claiming the trial was flawed. A new trial began in 2016, but Ríos Montt ultimately died in 2018.

Activists have made some progress in other struggles for justice. Survivors of the Chixoy Dam massacre fought for decades to attract global attention to the atrocity and gain reparations for their immeasurable losses. In January 2014, they won a case that granted them \$154 million in reparations from the government, which delivered the first payments in October 2015. Also in 2014, former guerrilla fighter Felipe Solano Barillas was convicted for a 1988 massacre of 22 people. In January 2016, 18 former military officers were arrested on charges related to disappearances and massacres.⁹ And in February 2016, a former military officer and a former paramilitary officer were convicted of war crimes, including sexual enslavement of women.¹⁰

Yet while these court cases bring some measure of closure to those who suffered the brutalities of the war, the people of Guatemala still bear many wounds that even decisive legal victories cannot heal.



A woman hides her face to testify against the former military members responsible for her rape and enslavement during Guatemala's civil war. In February 2016, the men were sentenced to 360 years in prison for their crimes.

⁷ Mark Tran. “Guatemala’s indigenous communities boosted by landmark reparations bill.” *The Guardian*. 17 January 2014.

⁸ The Center for Justice & Accountability. “Silent Holocaust: The Mayan Genocide.” *The Center for Justice & Accountability website*. 2016.

⁹ One of the accused—Edgar Justin Ovalle—could not be arrested due to the fact that he is currently a legislator and has immunity.

¹⁰ Ruis-Navarro, Catalina. “Guatemala sexual slavery verdict shows women’s bodies are not battlefields.” *The Guardian*. 29 February 2016.

In 2019, after navigating a complex government land program, AJWS grantee *Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA)* secured official legal titles for 81 displaced families to own land together. Now, for the first time in generations, they're laying down roots in their own soil.
Photograph by Christine Han



SNAPSHOT OF GUATEMALA'S CHALLENGES

- Guatemala has one of the most unequal distributions of income in Latin America. More than 50 percent of the nation lives below the poverty line¹¹—a figure that jumps to 80 percent in rural areas that are home to predominantly indigenous people.¹²
- Land distribution in Guatemala is also highly skewed, with 80% of arable land in the hands of less than 5% of the population.¹³
- Guatemala faces extreme rates of corruption. According to the watchdog organization, Transparency International, it is the 123rd most corrupt country (out of 168 surveyed).¹⁴
- Hunger is a major challenge facing Guatemalan families, particularly in indigenous communities. Over 40 percent of Guatemalan children under age five—and 80 percent of indigenous children—are malnourished.¹⁵
- Each year, corporations and landowners displace thousands of indigenous people and farmers from their land to make way for development projects that primarily benefit the economic and political elite.
- Human rights defenders face high levels of harassment and physical threats. These attacks occur at an average rate of at least one per day, with 884 incidents documented between 2017 and mid-2019. In this period, 39 human rights defenders were murdered.

¹¹ The World Bank. "World Bank Data, Guatemala World Development Indicators." The World Bank website (accessed 8 April 2016).

¹² The World Bank. "Guatemala Overview." The World Bank website (accessed 8 April 2016).

¹³ Valladares, Danilo. "Big Landowners Block Rural Development Law in Guatemala." Inter Press Service News Agency. 17 December 2012.

¹⁴ Transparency International. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2015: Results." Transparency International website (accessed 8 April 2016).

¹⁵ UNICEF. "Guatemala Overview." UNICEF website (accessed 8 April 2016).

POST-WAR CHALLENGES: INEQUALITY, CARTELS AND CORRUPTION

The tensions over land, ethnicity and economic inequality that fueled the civil war continue to permeate Guatemalan society today.

Guatemala has the second highest rate of income inequality in Latin America.¹⁶ Eighty percent of rural people live in poverty, and less than five percent of the population owns 80 percent of the land.¹⁷ The Maya make up over half of the country's 14.6 million people, but they have little power in the government or other decision-making forums and continue to experience intense discrimination. Indigenous women are doubly disadvantaged because they experience discrimination and violence because of their gender as well as their ethnicity. This social inequality plays out in devastating ways: For example, nearly twice as many indigenous women die in childbirth as non-indigenous women because they lack access to quality health care.

Land issues remain at the heart of many of Guatemala's economic, social and political divisions. Across the country and with the tacit support of the government, foreign companies and members of the land-holding Guatemalan elite have continued to displace rural people to make way for mining sites, dams and agricultural estates. The displaced often relocate to places where farmland and other resources vital to their survival are scarce, pushing them deeper into poverty. Those who manage to remain on their land must live in the midst of mines, hydroelectric dams, and palm oil, sugar cane and banana plantations that have destroyed their farmland and polluted their water.

As a major corridor for smuggling drugs from South America to the U.S., Guatemala has experienced a surge in violence from street gangs and other organized crime. Although the war on drugs has increased local police presence, officers receive low pay and poor training, and are largely outgunned by drug traffickers and other criminal cartels. Faced with these challenges, some police abuse their power to gain additional income or respect. In some cases, top police officials have been involved or colluded with drug cartels or drug runners.

Transparency International, the global corruption monitoring organization, rates Guatemala among the most corrupt countries in the world, for the prevalence of fraud, bribery and misuse of government funds. The country's leaders were once completely immune to punishment for such crimes; but in recent years, civil society groups and



A member of the Maya Ixmucane Women's Counsel (ACMMI), an AJWS grantee that works to promote women's rights, defend indigenous lands, and support survivors of the internal armed conflict. Photograph by Christine Han

the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) achieved significant success in routing out high-profile corruption.

In just over a decade, CICIG identified more than 600 elected officials, businesspeople and bureaucrats involved in high-level corruption and broke up 60 criminal networks in the country. In 2015, under pressure from civil society groups and CICIG, Guatemala's Congress lifted President Otto Pérez Molina's immunity to facilitate an investigation into his alleged involvement in a customs bribery ring. A judge issued a warrant for Pérez Molina's arrest, prompting him to resign—and leading to his imprisonment. In 2018, his vice president, Roxana Baldetti, was sentenced to 15-and-a-half years in prison for fraud, influence peddling and illicit association. And as of November 2019, Pérez Molina is still in jail awaiting trial.

Eager for a fresh start, Guatemalans elected former comedian Jimmy Morales to succeed Pérez Molina as president in October 2015. Yet Morales' election also raised concerns, as he received backing from former military officers implicated in massacres during the internal armed conflict. These concerns proved to be well warranted. President Morales and his administration embarked on a mission to dismantle checks and balances, weaken

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme. "Assessment of Development Results: Guatemala." May 2012.

¹⁷ Valladares, Danilo. "Big Landowners Block Rural Development Law in Guatemala." Inter Press Service News Agency. 17 December 2012.

institutions, shred the rule of law and viciously attack human rights defenders in Guatemala.

In 2018, Morales began his efforts to oust CICIG—the UN-backed anti-impunity commission—when it began to investigate him and his inner circle for corruption. In January of 2019, he unilaterally shut down CICIG and demanded that its foreign-born staff leave the country within 24 hours.

Also under Morales's leadership, the Guatemalan Congress drafted a law in February of 2019 that would grant amnesty to military officials who committed grave human rights violations during the internal armed conflict, including genocide, torture and forced disappearances. If the law passes, it will end the ongoing investigations into these crimes and free those who are currently behind bars.

In August of 2019, the people of Guatemala voted Jimmy Morales out, and elected Alejandro Giammattei, a right-wing political novice famous for directing Guatemala's prison system. Although Giammattei ran under a tough-on-crime platform, corruption and impunity do not seem to be among his chief concerns. He has stated that he will not reinstate CICIG—despite widespread public support for the commission.

With CICIG gone, judges and prosecutors who are fighting powerful agents of corruption—like business elites that siphon public funds or use their wealth to buy impunity for organized crime—find themselves in great peril. They face frequent death threats, attempts

at criminalization and targeted campaigns of online harassment. Vulnerable in their own country, they've been forced to seek international protection from organizations like the American Bar Association and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Yet, despite life-threatening risks, these courageous public servants continue to fight for justice and accountability in Guatemala.

THE RISK OF SPEAKING OUT

In recent years, more and more Guatemalans have spoken out against the injustices in their country.

These brave activists often face violent suppression of their activities. Between 2000 and mid-2015, AJWS grantee UDEFEGUA documented 4,485 acts of harassment, intimidation or violence against human rights defenders—roughly one attack per day. The perpetrators are usually thugs or assassins hired by corporations, drug cartels or corrupt officials. In some cases, the attackers are private or state security forces. Unfortunately, according to activists, Guatemalan police and courts typically respond with indifference or even aggression toward the victims and the people who care about them.

Despite the risks, Guatemalan human rights groups are pressing on in their quest for a more just and equal society. AJWS is supporting a number of these brave groups that are aiming to preserve indigenous life and culture, protect civil liberties, and ensure that all Guatemalan citizens may one day enjoy the full range of freedoms and the prosperity they deserve.

Roberto and Bajan use radio to teach listeners about human rights and sustainable farming in Sololá. The pair are members of CCDA, a grassroots group that uses funding from AJWS to empower indigenous people across Guatemala.





AJWS GRANTEES TAKE A STAND

Guatemala's complex history has given rise to many of its contemporary challenges—from the striking gap between the very rich and the poor, to pervasive government corruption, to widespread discrimination against indigenous people and women. Fortunately, Guatemala also has a long legacy of grassroots social movements striving to overcome these challenges.

Many of the individuals and organizations leading these movements are organizations that AJWS supports. They are using peaceful means to gain equality for women and indigenous communities, protect access to the land and resources upon which millions depend for survival, and press for an end to government corruption and the lack of justice for serious crimes—including those committed during the war. Their ultimate aim is to build a flourishing democracy in which all Guatemalans are treated with respect and dignity.

For example:

Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (UDEFEHUA) defends the safety and security of Guatemalan activists who speak truth to power. UDEFEHUA documents and reports harassment and attacks; trains organizations to protect their staff, offices and information; and has brought landmark cases to court on behalf of activists who have lost their lives in pursuit of equality and justice.

Prensa Comunitaria is a grassroots media organization that supports a network of 50 community-based reporters throughout Guatemala. Their members report directly from communities about human rights struggles that are often ignored, suppressed or distorted by the mainstream media. Despite experiencing a regular assault of threats and attacks, Prensa Comunitaria journalists remain steadfast in their commitment to local reporting. The

ABOVE Midwives Cecilia Escobar Ramos and Santos Margarita López are among the co-founders of CODECOT, a network that supports 800 midwives in Quetzaltenango. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik

Guatemala Human Rights Commission—a Washington, D.C.-based group dedicated to promoting human rights in Guatemala—honored the activists for their courage in 2015 with the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award, recognizing that “correspondents from Prensa Comunitaria have continued to challenge the systems that seek to silence them. Their valuable work represents an ongoing effort to defend the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of the press.”¹⁸

Asociación Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativa (CONGCOOP) is an alliance of NGOs working with grassroots organizations to secure the right to clean water. They focus particularly on rural indigenous communities that are facing the encroachment of palm oil plantations, which displace farmers, cause deforestation and pollute water sources. By conducting research on the effects that plantations have on the livelihoods of local communities, and by organizing these communities to advocate for their rights, CONGCOOP is working to ensure that indigenous peoples and farmers have access to and control over their land and the water sources that they depend on—and that rural communities’ land rights are respected when palm oil plantations attempt to take over their territories.

Asociación de Comunidades para el Desarrollo, Defensa de la Tierra y Recursos Naturales (ACODET) is another key player in the movement to stop dam projects that threaten rural communities. In 2014, after years of advocacy, ACODET and area communities had a major success when

they forced the government to halt its plans to build the Xalala Dam on the Chixoy River. This massive project—intended for the same river where hundreds of civilians were massacred to make way for a previous dam—would displace more than 2,000 people and impact the livelihoods of 8,000 indigenous farmers.

Asociación de Mujeres Qeqchi’es Nuevo Horizonte trains and empowers indigenous Q’eqchi’ women in Chisec, Alta Verapaz, to understand their rights, become politically active and address problems facing their communities. Thanks to the confidence and skills they have gained, local women now regularly represent Q’eqchi’ women and girls in local government meetings where women’s voices were previously absent. The group has also waged a community awareness campaign aimed at reducing sexual and domestic violence. Their advocacy led Chisec to increase resources for the Municipal Office for Women, which is charged with reducing gender-based violence and addressing other trends that negatively affect women and girls.

Bufete Jurídico de Derechos Humanos (BDH) is a legal aid bureau that provides pro-bono representation to people who have suffered human rights abuses, from survivors of massacres during the Guatemalan armed conflict, to indigenous communities whose lands have been seized by powerful corporations, to activists who have been wrongfully incarcerated for speaking out. A highly respected legal organization in Guatemala, BDH



LEFT Investigative journalist Nelton Rivera of Prensa Comunitaria covers the landmark trial of two former military members accused of sexual slavery during Guatemala’s civil war. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik **RIGHT** Edgar Perez is a leading human rights lawyer and founder of Bufete Juridico de Derechos Humanos, a legal aid organization that provides pro-bono representation to activists who have suffered human rights abuses. Photograph by Christine Han

¹⁸ Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA. “2015 Human Rights Defenders Award: Prensa Comunitaria.” Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA website (accessed 8 April 2016).

strategically pursues cases that will set legal precedents and end impunity for State-sponsored injustice. For example, its head litigator prosecuted the Rios Montt case, in which the former dictator of Guatemala was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Coordinadora Departamental de Comadronas Tradicionales de Quetzaltenango (CODECOT) supports a network of 800 midwives throughout Quetzaltenango, where midwives attend 80 percent of all births and yet face intense discrimination in the healthcare sector. Authorities routinely blame them for infant and maternal deaths, especially in rural areas without hospitals. When midwives refer their patients to hospitals, the staff often prevent them from visiting their patients, and then blame them for not bringing the patients sooner when things go wrong—even when the hospital itself is at fault. Through advocacy and education, CODECOT has markedly improved the situation for midwives and their patients. For example, in 2003, a committee established thanks to CODECOT’s advocacy investigated maternal and infant deaths and acquitted many midwives of wrongful charges levied against them. CODECOT also provides midwives with the equipment and training to deliver safer, more sophisticated care for mothers and their babies.

Centro de Análisis Forense y Ciencias Aplicadas (the “Center for Forensic Analysis and Applied Sciences”—CAFCA) conducts forensic investigations to recover

the bones of the tens of thousands of people who were “disappeared,” mostly by the military, during the Guatemalan armed conflict. Since 1997, they have completed 250 investigations, exhuming and recovering over 1,000 bodies and bringing closure to families who have searched for their loved ones for years, sometimes decades. As these families grieve and heal, CAFCA offers them mental health services and psychosocial support. And it collects the evidence needed to indict and convict the officials responsible for these disappearances, bringing justice for their victims one step closer.

Autoridades Ancestrales, or “Ancestral Authorities,” is a coalition representing many different indigenous and ethnic groups in Guatemala working to stop the injustices affecting their communities: theft of indigenous land, discrimination sanctioned by the government, and policies that suppress and criminalize human rights activism. For centuries, the ruling classes and wealthy elites strategically divided different indigenous and ethnic groups to diminish their collective power. But after Roxana Baldetti and Otto Pérez Molina’s ouster in 2015, indigenous leaders felt emboldened to set aside their differences and pursue change together. Today, Autoridades Ancestrales represents the single largest block of indigenous authorities and Afro-descendant leaders advocating for legislation and political appointments that will advance the interests and rights of their communities.





FACING PAGE A leader of the Maya Ixmucañe Women's Counsel (ACMMI) visits the home of one of its members. **ABOVE** In 2019, AJWS convened 21 Guatemalan grantees for a three-day retreat to strengthen the human rights movement in the country. Photographs by Christine Han

Festivales Solidarios is leading an innovative effort to help repair the social fabric of indigenous communities through performance art. The organization uses music, theater, dance, poetry and visual arts to help urban and rural communities heal from the myriad forms of violence inflicted on them—and reclaim their cultural heritage

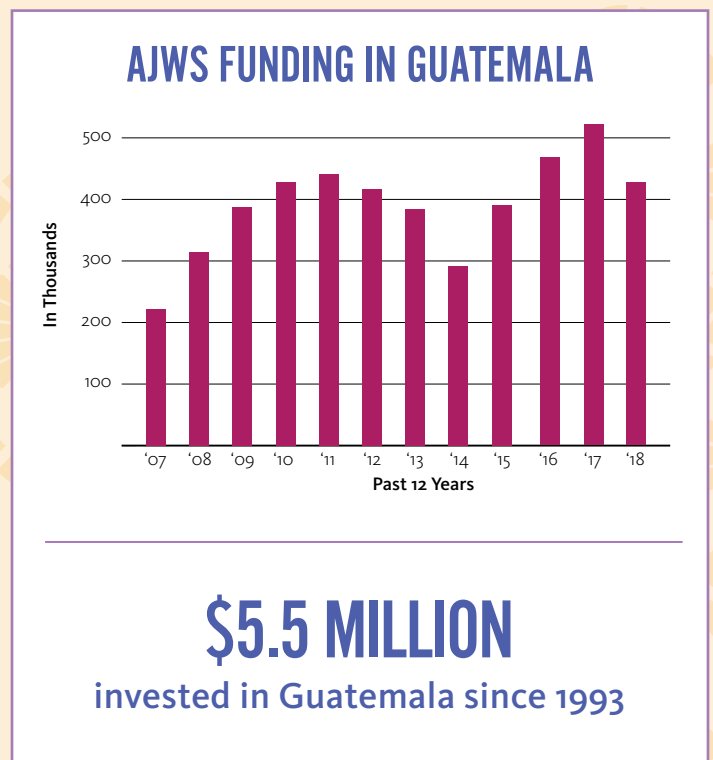
and historical memory. Through the arts they are taking back the streets, which are heavily policed, creating open spaces for political prisoners to tell their stories, and aiding victims of violence to process their deep-seated trauma and transform their pain into power to foster political and societal change.

OUR COMMITMENT IN GUATEMALA

AJWS is committed to helping Guatemalans implement local solutions of their choosing to the complex challenges they face. We focus on supporting grassroots organizations that represent people who experience severe inequality in society—particularly indigenous people, women and youth. AJWS funding enables our grantees to become stronger and more effective, join forces with others, and amplify their strategies and messages so they can create powerful movements for justice, equality and human rights.

With AJWS's support, these organizations are:

- Educating and empowering oppressed communities to learn about and exercise their human rights, assume leadership roles in their communities and organize local responses when their rights are violated
- Supporting and strengthening social change organizations led by and for indigenous people, women, youth, small-scale farmers and human rights defenders
- Conducting political and legal advocacy to stop violations of civil rights, including discrimination, corruption and violence
- Speaking out and advocating against projects that encroach on local people's land and waterways, including dams, mines and plantations developed without their consent
- Working to prevent the hunger and poverty that results when development displaces indigenous people and others from the land they depend on for survival
- Supporting Guatemalan human rights defenders to protect themselves from threats and violence and seek justice when attacks occur
- Forging coalitions and alliances with other grassroots groups in Guatemala and across Latin America to create stronger movements for human rights in the region



In May 2019, AJWS convened 21 Guatemalan grantees for a three-day retreat. The activists formed bonds that will strengthen their growing movement to confront authoritarian leadership in their government and bolster justice and equality in the country. Photograph by Christine Han



BEYOND GRANTMAKING: HOW DOES AJWS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

AJWS provides financial support and more to strengthen social change organizations and larger movements. To accomplish this we:

- Support grantees for multiple years, because sustainable change takes time
- Invest in nascent organizations and help them grow bigger and stronger
- Address the root causes of human rights abuses
- Bring clusters of similar and complementary groups together, enabling them to learn from each other and build strong, united movements
- Promote our grantees in the media and foster their leadership on the international stage
- Ensure that women, indigenous people, LGBTQI people, religious and ethnic minorities, and other groups remain at the center of our social change efforts
- Conduct research and share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, advancing the field of human rights and development

AJWS GRANTEES IN GUATEMALA: A CLOSER LOOK



AJWS's grantees in Guatemala are making progress against tremendous odds. Their stories show how grassroots activists are securing justice for war crimes, protecting the land and advancing human rights for all Guatemalans.

In 2019, Dominga (center) became a landowner for the first time. Here, she sits outside her home in La Flecha, Altaverapaz, with two leaders from CCDA, an AJWS grantee that supported her and her community to achieve this dream. Photograph by Christine Han

COMITÉ CAMPESINO DEL ALTIPLANO

(Highlands Committee of Small Farmers, CCDA)

Rural communities work together to defend their land and way of life.

In Guatemala, peasants whose families have lived and farmed the same plots of land for generations are facing rapid encroachment on their land and way of life. Many small farming communities—including indigenous communities—lack official land titles, despite obvious historic and cultural ties to their territory. Even when communities can show proof of ownership of their land, corrupt lawyers, government officials and landowners can use their stature and connections to prove otherwise. Because of this vulnerability, corporations and landowners backed by the government and the judiciary displace and sometimes forcibly evict many residents in order to use the land to mine or plant crops for export. Those who remain often have difficulty supporting their families when the soil, water or forests that once nurtured life are damaged or destroyed.

Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA) is a grassroots organization of small farmers working in 16 departments of Guatemala to confront land rights challenges and meet the needs of rural, predominantly Mayan communities. CCDA's founders began working together in the 1980s and became a formal nonprofit in 2000. Together, they help local farmers protest harmful farming techniques that are spoiling natural resources; protect their land from environmental damage; and learn to survive despite their changed landscape. In partnership with other farmer-led groups, CCDA also compiles accounts of human rights abuses and brings this information to the public's attention, leading protests and advocating for national legislation that will better protect the rights of local farmers.

“Our fight for our lands is not easy ... we have to work hard to make the land bear fruit—but now we have where to live. Lands that belong to us.”

—Dominga Xol, member of CCDA

In their own country, landowners for the first time

In February 2019, after a long and arduous battle, a newly formed community in Altaverapaz—comprised of a group of farming families from across the region who had been forcefully displaced from their lands, sometimes more than once—was able to secure ownership rights over a tract of land called La Flecha, with support and leadership from CCDA.

One member of this community is 57-year-old widow Dominga Xol. Diabetic and nearly blind, Dominga now owns land for the first time in her life. Long before arriving at La Flecha, she and her family lived and farmed on lands that had been worked and cared for by her community for generations, predating modern titles and deeds. But when a wealthy landowner purchased the territory she lived on, he hired a paramilitary group to do away with its residents.

“I cried and cried,” Dominga recalls of the night the thugs came. “They threw away our food, our pots and pans, our clothing ... they burned down my house ... they took everything.” Landless and penniless, Dominga and her family were forced to run to the mountains for fear of their lives. “We didn’t know what to do,” she says, “we didn’t have a way to survive.” But fortunately, Dominga and her family got connected to CCDA.

CCDA's staff brought Dominga and her children to La Flecha, along with other families in similar dire straits who needed a place to call home.

Despite the challenges that lie ahead to develop this community and make the land fertile, for Dominga, knowing that she will never be displaced again is invaluable. “When we arrived here, I felt relief from all the pain I've endured,” she sighs. “Our fight for our lands is not easy. It's true that now we have to work hard to make the land bear fruit—but now we have where to live. Lands that belong to us.”

LOCATION: 16 departments throughout Guatemala

WEBSITE: www.ccdaguatemala.org

FACEBOOK: facebook.com/ccda.guatemala

2019 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET: \$524,361

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$370,624 total since 2008



UNIDAD DE DEFENSORES Y DEFENSORAS DE DERECHOS HUMANOS EN GUATEMALA

(Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit of Guatemala, UDEFEGUA)

An award-winning NGO helps activists stay safe so they can keep speaking out against injustice.

“We are telling the truth. We want to be heard, and we want justice,” said a petite, elderly woman to a room full of journalists and human rights activists in Guatemala City on February 13, 2016. A survivor of sexual slavery during Guatemala’s decades-long armed conflict, the woman’s face was obscured by a Mayan scarf to protect her identity. But her message was clear: She and 14 fellow survivors wanted justice for the years of abuses they endured at the hands of Guatemalan soldiers, and they wanted it now.

Two weeks later, the survivors got the justice they demanded. On February 29, Guatemala’s High Risk Court convicted former military officer Esteelmer Reyes Girón and former paramilitary officer Heriberto Valdez Asij of war crimes committed in Sepur Zarco village, sentencing them to a total of 360 years in prison. In addition to being held responsible for enslaving the women, the men were found culpable for multiple murders and forced disappearances that occurred in Sepur Zarco during the early 1980s.

Protecting those who risk their lives for truth and justice

The Sepur Zarco verdict was a victory in Guatemalans’ ongoing pursuit of justice for atrocities committed during the war. But it may not have been possible without the support of a number of brave Guatemalan human rights activists and groups—including **Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (UDEFEGUA)**, a longtime AJWS grantee that helped ensure the safety and security of the women and their lawyers during the trial.

Established in 2000, UDEFEGUA works to protect human rights defenders—from citizens like the defendants in the Sepur Zarco case, to civil society activists, to journalists—who speak out or take risks in defense of justice.

UDEFEGUA supports these defenders by monitoring and reporting on relevant security threats; providing counseling and legal aid; teaching strategies to improve security for both defenders and the sensitive information they possess; and advocating for laws and policies that advance the protection and rights of individuals and organizations working to promote human rights.

During the Sepur Zarco trial, UDEFEGUA accompanied the 15 survivors to court each day, offering moral support to the women. Its staff also ensured the women's protection and intervened when they were being harassed by onlookers.

LOCATION: Throughout Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador

WEBSITE: www.undefegua.org

2019 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET: \$882,455

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$805,460 total since 2008

“At the beginning of the trial, there was a man outside the court with a microphone calling the women prostitutes and saying really ugly things,” UDEFEGUA’s founder and director, Claudia Samayoa, told AJWS. “We documented it and asked the authorities to act because he was actually committing psychological violence, which is illegal according to our law.”

Unwavering courage in the face of unrelenting threats

By standing with the women during the trial, UDEFEGUA may have saved their lives: Dozens of human rights defenders are killed each year in Guatemala by those who wish to silence them.

UDEFEGUA and other advocates believe the assailants in many of these cases are hired by government officials or backers of development projects seeking to intimidate or remove those who stand in the way of their political or economic gain. AJWS’s grantees are among those at risk of such attacks, because they are often protesting the actions of powerful public figures or seeking to stop economic projects that fail to benefit—and often harm—rural communities. These dynamics make UDEFEGUA’s work not only difficult, but also dangerous.

“We are an institution that stands up to powerful, arrogant, corrupt and criminal actors who have verbally and physically attacked us ... and even threatened our families,” said Claudia, who has survived five attempts on her life and was put on a hit list by a convicted criminal in 2014.

A global reputation for advancing justice

Despite the dangers, Claudia and UDEFEGUA staff refuse to abandon their work. Their critical contributions have garnered international admiration. Amnesty International and the United Nations’ refugee agency (UNHCR) have both praised the organization and, in 2013, the U.S.-based Guatemala Human Rights Commission honored UDEFEGUA with the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defenders Award.

In her acceptance speech, Claudia compared UDEFEGUA staff to emergency response workers. “We are firefighters, rushing to be present with human rights defenders in their moments of need.”



Since 2000, UDEFEGUA has responded to hundreds of human rights “fires” across Guatemala. AJWS looks forward to helping them extinguish or, better yet, prevent thousands more fires in the years to come.

OPPOSITE PAGE *Survivors of sexual slavery during Guatemala’s civil war risked their lives to press charges against their abusers. AJWS grantee UDEFEGUA helped ensure their safety and security throughout the historic trial.*

THIS PAGE *UDEFEGUA’s founder and director, Claudia Samayoa (left), monitors proceedings at the Sepur Zarco trial with a colleague.*

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ABOVE Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Photograph by Christine Han

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