

RESILIENCE



A Publication of Project Harvest

Winter 2021-2022

After accompanying 162 families in eight communities for approximately five years, **Project Harvest** is strengthening the transition to independence as these participants take on all responsibilities for maintaining their vegetable gardens. This has been a gradual process, allowing families and communities time to acquire the skills and confidence necessary to succeed on their own.

Three Phases

To reach this point, each community passes through three phases. The first phase consists of becoming organized at the individual and group levels. Our team focuses on developing

The second phase builds on these skills so that the communities become better organized, knowledgeable about their rights and ways to build civic participation (citizenship) and are in a better position to solicit and manage their own projects. One particular goal is for communities to have a plan for obtaining seeds and inputs in order to ensure the continued production of the gardens.

A third phase focusses on the creation of a formal women's organization which brings together all the communities where Project Harvest works. This framework gives continuity to the efforts of the previous years and provides experience in soliciting and obtaining institutional support as a group. At the end

these years of work, we believe that the foundations have been laid for further independent progress with continued but reduced direct support.

Independent Actions

For 2021, phase one has been completed but phases two and three, which require face-to-face group meetings, were postponed because of the COVID pandemic.

At the community level, there is still momentum in finding resources in order for the gardens to continue to be productive. Although COVID has not made this easy, the community groups have been following a variety of approaches to find the type of resources they need to ensure viability of their gardens. For example,

of the eight communities, Cuesta Del

Aire has been accessing local greenhouses to buy their own seedlings. Vásquez, Casa Blanca and El Guayabo have coordinated the purchase and delivery of seedlings, and Pitahaya, Oquén, Tunucó and La Ceiba, have managed to access seeds through various solicitations.



Rosario Vásquez, one of Project Harvest's Community Guides, is a source of leadership providing ideas and know-how for families accessing resources in order to maintain their vegetable gardens.

the necessary knowledge for the implementation of family gardens, from the preparation of the land, its conservation, setting up protective fences, through planting and all the cultivation needed to obtain vegetables both for family consumption and for sale. Three years are spent providing participants with technical support and the necessary materials and inputs.

PROJECT HARVEST - GUATEMALA
EMPOWERING RURAL SUBSISTENCE COMMUNITIES

E-mail: project.harvest.guatemala@gmail.com **Website:** projectharvest.org

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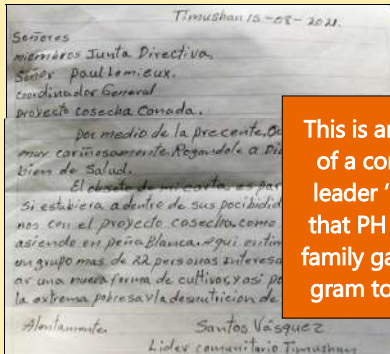


Letter from the Chair of the Board

Dear Friends and Supports

This issue of Resilience will focus on how the struggles of families that Project Harvest works with have been intensified by the COVID Pandemic but also why Maria Gonzales, who sadly died earlier this year, could say, "I carry Project Harvest in my heart".

Peña Blanca is a typical example of a community that has experienced struggles for many years. We will look more closely at the impacts of COVID on rural communities such as Peña Blanca one year into the Pandemic. We will also outline how, after closely accompanying them for five years, Project Harvest is helping 162 families to become more independent.



This is an example of a community leader's request that PH bring the family garden program to them.

All of our work, of course, is dependent on adequate funding. Paul will show you how you can make a remarkable difference in the lives of rural Guatemalan families by starting your own Growing Project Fundraiser or perhaps you would consider becoming a monthly donor. On behalf of the indigenous families in Guatemala with whom we work, Maya, Chort'i and K'iche', we extend our profound

gratitude for your continued support in whatever way you are able to help.

Sincerely,
Gary Bowron
Chair of the Board

Start your own Growing Project / A Pilot Fundraiser - A Big Success

At the start of the pandemic in the cold months of April and May 2020, some seeds I had saved were germinated. For the longest time after sprouting, their "true" leaves refused to grow. Then in late May they took off and suddenly I had over a hundred little tomato seedlings. My question to myself was, "What was I to do with so many plants?" Seedlings in garden centers were being swept up by so many people needing plants. I thought, "Why not give them away, free, as my own little contribution to food security?"

Then came some bright advice from a neighbour who said, "Ask for a donation for Project Harvest". And so I did.

In the spring of 2021 I expanded on the tomato plants to include kale, wild strawberries and many more - again with great success! People seemed to appreciate receiving a free plant and most gladly made a donation to help the cause of Project Harvest's family vegetable garden program in Guatemala.

The question I had was, "What other plants would people be interested in for the summer and fall?" Pumpkins came to mind for Halloween! So, along with a few friends, I planted a field of pumpkins in June 2021 to sell as a fundraiser in October. No easy chore - most survived angular leaf spot, insect infestations and mildew with a lot of organic care.



A growing project encourages an individual or group of gardeners to plant, tend and harvest a crop of something and sell or give it away for a donation to PH. In this case I sold the pumpkins for \$5/ea.

Two years of this pilot project has taught me how relatively easy, enjoyable, and social it can be. In 2021, between tomato and pumpkin plants, over \$3,000 was raised. You can do this too! Whether you are in an urban or rural setting, be it in your kitchen, basement or class room, become a grower for **Project Harvest**. If you are an individual, family, church group or youth/school club, grow something - potted flowers, vegetable seedlings or pumpkins - then give them away for a donation to Project Harvest. By starting your own growing project, you too can make a remarkable difference and help families improve their nutrition and well-being in Guatemala.

Contact us for a "how to get started" kit or brochure at project.harvest.guatemala@gmail.com

Paul Lemieux
General Coordinator

Peña Blanca: A Community with a History of Struggle

Project Harvest has started to work with 22 campesino families in the Mayan Ch'orti' community of Peña Blanca, Department of Zacapa. The community is situated in a pristine forest area, with access to water, in the Sierra del Merendon mountain range.



Sowing seeds after raised beds are prepared.

Family and Community Life

The average family has six members; the parents typically have less than two years schooling, while more than half have no schooling at all. Some have received religious formation, training in coffee cultivation or have been part of the local Community Development Council. The homes have dirt floors and are built with *bajarque* (a kind of mud with sticks). The roof is made of thatch and sheet metal. There are no latrines and many families suffer from bedbugs, which lodge in the walls. The village does have piped water, electricity, a primary school and a health post. Common illnesses are the flu, fever and diarrhea. In emergencies, when ambulance transportation is not available, private transportation will cost the equivalent of \$55 for a one-hour trip to the closest town. The normal fare is \$1.80.

Everyone grows corn and beans on their own land and some grow a little coffee. Many raise chickens for family consumption or to sell when money is needed. The community's annual food cycle starts in September with the family's corn and coffee harvests, followed by picking coffee on neighbouring plantations for \$8 a day. During this period, which lasts until February, people eat well. In March, April and May, families begin to prioritize expenses and most of their earnings are used to buy more corn, even if they can only afford to purchase it by the pound instead of in cheaper 100-pound sacks. From June to August, diets are poor: corn is scarce and families consume beans, coffee and bananas, or whatever fruit they have.

Defending Their Land

In the 1980s and 1990s, plantation owners wanted to expand their coffee-growing interests and tried to grab more than 300 acres of forested mountain, which historically belonged to the families in Peña Blanca and three neighbouring communities. At times, these landowners paid off politicians and judges to get their way. Still, the people of Peña Blanca stood up to intimidation and threats of violence from these armed and wealthy families. They called for support and accompaniment from several organizations dedicated to the defense of Chorti territories: COMACH, CALDH, SERJUS and the Colectivo Madre Selva.



Project Harvest uses the "wow" or shock effect by creating the right conditions for healthy plants thus convincing families of the value of investing their time in its maintenance and upkeep.

Gardens are terraced, fenced-in, organically fertilized before the first seeds and seedlings are planted.

The communities succeeded in defending their land and have lived in relative calm for many years.

Today, however, local plantation owners are preparing, once again, to seize land and cut down the trees to plant coffee and cardamom. The campesinos are organizing to face this new threat and want to form a legally incorporated organization in order to press for legal title to their mountain forest. Peña Blanca has asked **Project Harvest** to accompany them in their struggle.

Project Harvest - Guatemala / Financial Statement 2020	Totals 2020	Totals 2019
ASSETS - December 31, 2020		
Curent Assets: cash & cash equavelent: Project Harvest Program Funds, MCC Regular Program, Rotary Club Grant for Regular Program	79,816.59	66,792.02
Accounts receivable	7,335.55	4,020.52
Captial assets outside Canada (pick-up truck)	6,387.38	9,317.65
Total Assets	93,539.52	80,130.19
LIABILITIES - December 31, 2019		
Accounts payable - Guatemala	1,950.06	540.85
Amounts owing - Canada	1,396.45	1,756.78
Total Liabilities	3,346.51	2,297.63
Total Net Assets (Represents starting balance for Jan., 1, 2021)	90,193.01	77,832.56
REVENUE - January 1 to December 31, 2020		
Donations from Individuals	66,100.85	61,249.04
Donations from Institutions	13,655.00	7,620.00
MCC Grant for Regular Program	-	2,469.62
Rotary Club Grant for Regular Program	51,459.74	38,897.00
Exchange Gain or Loss	(2,698.79)	-0.12
Total Revenue	128,516.80	110,235.54
EXPENSES - January 1 to December 31, 2020		
Regular Programs: Project Harvest, MCC, Rotary Club	100,511.90	171,491.38
Management & Administration in Guatemala & Canada	9,053.84	10,323.73
Interest and bank charges	2,144.31	1,565.95
Fundraising in Canada	913.05	1,021.59
Total Expenses	112,623.10	184,402.65
Net Assets at the beginning of year - January 1, 2020	74,299.31	151,503.10
Increase in Net Assets at the end of year - December 31, 2020	15,893.70	-73,670.54
Total Net Assets (Represents starting balance for Jan., 1, 2021)	90,193.01	77,832.56

On the Passing of Maria Paxtor Gonzales



Sadly, Sadly, Maria Paxtor Gonzales, passed away in 2021. Maria's passing has been a great loss. She was the mother of our promoter Paula Velásquez and one of the first participants in Project Harvest. We have been told that when the pandemic was at its worst, Maria said:

"Thanks to the people of **Project Harvest** who are with us. It is because of them we have food in the kitchen. Thanks to the donors, thanks to the people from Canada who are giving us seeds, and thanks to those who have a heart to help us. Other people can't find anything at home because they haven't had the opportunity to have a garden.

I carry **Project Harvest** in my heart because that's where I learned how to work my garden and where I get the food I need."

Welcome to new members
of the Communications
Committee



Joshua Garcia-Barrios is our new Volunteer Communications Coordinator (VCC). Joshua is studying public health at the Waterloo University. He has experience working with projects encompassing environmental research, food security, fundraising, video development and coding.



Bridget Ah-Long is joining Project Harvest as a communications volunteer. Bridget comes from a design and public relations background and is an advocate for human, environmental and social sustainability.



Elizabeth Hendy is a Chinese-British violinist, multimedia artist and a graduate of McGill University in violin performance. She is passionate about performing and teaching music and raising money for charity through performances.

Please Donate!

Online at: projectharvest.org

Or by Mail:

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Visit our **Website:** projectharvest.org



BY THE
NUMBERS
IN 2021

PROJECT HARVEST - Guatemala

Impact of COVID on Rural Communities 2020 - 2021

In the past 18 months rural communities have witnessed the collapse of their food and income security together with setbacks in education and increased gender based violence. The ongoing crisis has created high levels of anxiety and stress with almost all families feeling insecure, uninformed and not properly assisted. For example, acute malnutrition more than doubled between the end of 2019 and mid-2020. **Project Harvest's** programs have the potential of remediating some of the pandemic's worst impacts where it works.



- **75%*** of families suffer from reduced income
- **25%*** of families eating less
- **25%*** of families have switched to eating cheaper but less nutritious food

FOOD INSECURITY

The consequences of containment measures i.e. harsh government restrictions on transport and mobility caused the collapse of the rural economy and fewer work opportunities.

Many campesino families have gone into survival mode having to eat less, sell off land, goods, and livestock or seek loans.



- **30%*** increase in violence against women and girls

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

The consequences of prolonged confinement has resulted in an increase of women reporting incidents of violence as well as a disturbing rise in sexual violence against children.



- **1.5 years¹** of schooling will be lost due to school closures for grade school children

EDUCATIONAL DECLINE

The consequences of prolonged school closures are sure to worsen the pre-pandemic situation of only 56% of students graduating from the 6th grade.

Impacts of Project Harvest's Garden Program

The results are positive when families have a chance to grow their own produce.



- **98%**** of families have improved diets
- **65%***** of families generated income

* Survey: Short-term impacts of COVID-19 in rural Guatemala call for a closer, continuous look at the food security and nutritional patterns of vulnerable families <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/survey-short-term-impacts-covid-19-rural-guatemala-call-closer-continuous-look-food-security>

¹ Prensa Libre <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/comunitario/guatemala-puede-perder-1-5-anos-de-escolaridad-por-el-cierre-de-escuelas/>

Independent Survey of 132 families *Some large families consume the entire garden's produce.

Rural Communities – 18 Months of Challenging COVID19 Impacts

The COVID pandemic in Guatemala advanced from large cities to small towns, ultimately reaching rural communities. While the media reports about the waves and the saturation of hospitals in urban areas, little is known about how COVID has afflicted inhabitants of rural communities.

Of the 10 rural communities in which Project Harvest works, six have already registered official cases of the contagion, but these reports are not reliable. There have been, for instance, reports from all communities of family members experiencing flu-like symptoms but testing to confirm or rule out the disease is not always available. Even some members of Project Harvest's Guatemalan team caught COVID or had close family members suffer or die from it.

Clear and reliable information regarding vaccination, its effects and benefits, is not always available, and where it is available, it is not always communicated in the Indigenous languages of the local communities. Waves of rumors compound the problem, making people reluctant to be vaccinated. Even when the population do seek vaccination, health centers do not have enough vaccines to attend to them.

Undoubtedly, the greatest problem facing these communities is the bias of the government toward urban areas to the detriment of rural and indigenous populations.

The Pandemic and Work

In all this turmoil, unemployment is increasing. Even though men and women have been able once again to travel to farms in Honduras, Mexico and the southern coast of Guatemala in search of work, the transportation costs have doubled, worsening the already fragile economy of poor families. Migration to the US has also increased but not without difficulties, as this testimony attests:

"I am a single mother and I have always liked my family to stay together. When the pandemic began, it was hard for my older

children to find work and there were days when we had nothing to eat, only tortillas. Out of desperation, my 19-year-old son went to the United States. We pawned two pieces of land to pay the coyote (the person who takes them) for this to happen. I was sad, crying, lamenting his departure. After three months we found out that he had arrived, and that now he is working. But now my other son wants to leave because he too is desperate."

Roselia, Parracaná

The Pandemic and Project Harvest

The **Project Harvest** formation program has been put on pause as a pandemic prevention measure. Reaction from community leaders has been firm: they have stated that they need to continue with the training, because they want to continue learning, continue meeting with the groups and continue receiving training in human rights, organization, and project solicitations.

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Notwithstanding the pause, communities have moved from fear to action and used the organizational skills acquired through Project Harvest's formation program to improve their situation.

The community of Vázquez solicited and received training in productive activities, such as bread making. In Chiyat, seven families were able to access a project that helps them acquire hens

whose eggs they sell in the local market. Two communities, Chiyat and Casa Blanca, joined other networks to get the municipal government to attend to their project proposals to meet their need for food. The communities tell us the formation program provides opportunities for them to hone their skills, be inspired, and be motivated to continue to demand action from their political leaders.

Many more children are suffering malnutrition because the pandemic has exacerbated isolation, unemployment and lack of access to food.



PROJECT HARVEST - GUATEMALA

EMPOWERS RURAL FAMILIES THROUGH TRAINING
IN FOOD SECURITY AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

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