

HOME • NEWS & STORIES • FOOD AND WATER

Harvesting hope in Central America: school nutrition programs address food insecurity

By Reid Davis
August 29, 2023

Share   



At the end of the school term, students at Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta de Aldea Simajhuleu (primary school) in Simajhuleu, Guatemala, take home crops from the school's container garden. All photos by Laura Noel/CARE

It's the last day of the primary-level school term in Simajhuleu, a rural mountain community in Guatemala. Around an open-air courtyard, groups of boys and girls excitedly clutch recycled soda bottles and plastic buckets

containing green vegetables, growing vibrantly from small caches of rich soil.

They've been cultivating these plants in a school container garden throughout the year, and today they'll get to take them home to their families. These plants will soon become food, as the garden's products, scattered throughout the community, are incorporated into meals. The nutrients these iron-rich plants provide are important in a country where nearly a quarter of the population experiences food insecurity and nutritional gaps.

"Despite this being an agricultural community, we offer new skills to the parents and the children," says Baudilio Tubin, a fifth-grade teacher at Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta Aldea Simajhuleu (aka "Official Rural Mixed School of Simajhuleu Village.") "We teach them that they can produce the foods they are going to consume in small areas, not in large areas as is normal."



Fifth-grade teacher Baudilio Tubin helps his students as they assemble fruit salad in a classroom.



A group of boys pose with their container-garden crops.

Born out of necessity, the recycled-container-garden program in Simajhuleu's model school was a response to COVID-19 and an adaptation to the scarcity of open, flat land near the school that could be cultivated for a traditional garden. It was an important innovation, suggested by technical experts, that allowed this school's CARE-sponsored nutrition programming to move forward in all aspects.

The container garden in Simajhuleu is mirrored by a similar school vegetable garden at another model school, the Centro Basico (Basic Education Center) Max Martinez Zambrano in the community of El Porvenir, in Honduras' central highlands region near the city of Siguatepeque. There, industrious students, along with parent volunteers, tend a garden carved into stair-step terraces on a hillside at the rear of the campus.

In both schools, the curriculum includes material about healthy food and healthy choices, taking the form of songs, games, and – for early grades – painting and coloring activities. Even physical education carries on the theme.



Guatemalan students play a nutrition-themed game in class.



Mariano Lopez (left) is a fifth-grade teacher at CB Max Martinez Zambrano primary school (K-9) in El Porvenir, Honduras and supervisor of the school's community garden, which the students are tending today.

Beyond the schoolhouse door

Overseen by CARE under the banner of “Nourishing the Future,” these school outreach programs address food insecurity and nutrition not just among schoolchildren, but in the larger community.

“Similar to every community in the country, there are people and families who find it difficult to get [enough] food,” says Otilia Padilla, principal of CB Max Martinez Zambrano. “However, through the program, we have taught the parents about the proper consumption of foods. Also, we have strengthened the family gardens; how to make family gardens where some parents are now having orchards and gardens in their homes to improve the nutrition of their families.”

Through the past three years of the project, CARE and its partners reached 49,297 schoolchildren, teachers, and parents (mostly mothers) in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua – the four countries where the program operates – despite school closures due to COVID-19. As these model schools in Honduras and Guatemala demonstrate, this took the form of promoting nutritious foods and healthy eating habits at school and at home, as well as facilitating those eating habits via school gardens, community and home gardens, and volunteer programs.



Supported by CARE, CEB Max Martinez Zambrano, a model school in El Porvenir, Honduras, offers instruction in nutrition, hygiene, health, and fitness. Otilia Hortencia Padilla, the school's director, shares a moment with first grade student Laura Sofia Cabrera.

Food systems feeling the pinch

This program carries on against a backdrop of deepening need. According to the International Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) of which CARE is a member, in Guatemala 3.9 million people, 22.4% of the population, were experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity between March and May 2022. During the same period in Honduras, 2.2 million people, 21.4% of its population, were acutely food insecure.

That number is projected to increase, with familiar global factors as drivers: the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, and the increasing price of agricultural inputs and food imports driven by the war in Ukraine.

According to the Pan American Health Organization, the prevalence of hunger in the four-country region is the highest it has been in the last 15 years. The World Food Program noted a 51% reduction in employment across the region.

In November, CARE's Justice and Economic Program for Women and Youth team conducted a family food insecurity survey in San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala. The team conducted 84 interviews with mothers in and around this rural town of 32,000.

Among the findings:

- Daily income falls in the \$5-7/day range.
- 94 percent report their families consume cereals and grains throughout the week, yet only 30% have an adequate, year-round supply of corn for tortillas (typically offered at all three of the day's meals, according to cultural tradition.)
- In rural areas, the following factors negatively impact food security: climate variability, unemployment, and food costs that have increased while wages remain static.



Honduras women at work: a parent volunteer works in the school's kitchen at CEB Max Martinez Zambrano, preparing nutritious lunches from the products of the school's community garden.

From garden to kitchen

In Honduras, teachers like Mariano Lopez are doing everything they can to deliver healthy food to local families. In addition to teaching fifth grade, Mariano oversees the garden at Max Martinez Zambrano, which grows beets, cabbage, radish, beans, onions, and corn, with seeds provided by CARE, with the school's kitchen using the produce for healthy lunches. At the end of the term, there is enough surplus from the garden to send vegetables home with students.

For Mariano, who grew up around gardening, the work is a passion for multiple reasons.

“I love my job,” he says. “I like working with students because it’s satisfying when you see small children learning what you are teaching them.”

When the school was closed for COVID the garden went dormant, but many school families started gardens of their own during this time with seeds from CARE, while teachers checked on them and helped when needed. This improved the dietary diversity of school-aged children in Honduras – a key indicator of project success.



Detail shot of artwork made by students from recycled containers at CEB Max Martinez Zambrano.

In the spotlight

When school resumed, so did practical efforts to demonstrate and provide healthy eating choices. In Simajhuleu, fifth graders wore aprons and gloves while they assembled fruit salad. At this primary school, fifth graders train fourth graders, who then become the trainers when they advance.

In El Porvenir, parent volunteers staff the school kitchen, making a delicious bean soup to serve to students, teachers, and guests. Both institutions serve as models for their countries, demonstrating what is possible.



Students at Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta de Aldea Simajuleu work together to prepare fruit salad in a classroom.

“Next year we already have plans to develop training for other schools on the topic of food and nutrition security, and we’re bringing people from other schools to carry out internships here, with the idea for those staff members of other schools to learn to plant food gardens,” says Otilia, the Max Martinez Zambrano principal. “In addition to this, the Ministry [of Education] announced that for next year, gardens are going to be a mandate to every school in the country, and they’re going to be taking us as a model for a school that has had success working with school gardens already.”

“That’s our interest,” she adds. “To be able to advocate, to be able to influence – around the school garden and other elements of food and nutrition security programming.”

Tags

EDUCATION FOOD INSECURITY GUATEMALA HONDURAS