

The role of NGOs in promoting adaptation to climate change in developing countries: a case study of Guatemala.

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Produced as part of the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme 2020.

Under the supervision of Professor Ali Watson (School of International Relations).

Section 1: Introduction

It is the scientific consensus that anthropogenic emissions have a significant impact on the climate system (IPCC, 2014: 2). A climate justice lens highlights that, despite being a cumulative problem which developed countries have historically contributed more to, climate change will affect developing countries significantly more (Puaschunder, 2020: 6). However, this still does not tell the full story. Within developing countries, there exists substantial disparity in the degree to which people experience climate change, with minority groups and Indigenous peoples among the worst affected (Baird, 2008). Such is the case in Guatemala, in Central America, with an estimated Indigenous population of around 60% according to Indigenous peoples' representatives, or around 40% according to the national census (IWGIA, 2020; Minority Rights Group International, 2018).

Due to there being significant spatial and socioeconomic differentials to peoples' experiences of climate change, local experiences are central to climate change adaptation (CCA), and local non-governmental actors play an important role (Agrawal, 2008). This study will analyse the approaches of non-profit NGOs whose projects have a CCA focus in Guatemala. It will (a) discuss how the NGOs design and implement CCA-focused projects (b) discuss how they create sustainable positive impact and (c) uncover some of the main contextual challenges the NGOs face. The research is informed by qualitative interviews with five NGO officials, and aims to contribute mainly to literature on climate justice and local CCA.

1.2: Background

Guatemala has consistently been listed as one of the most *vulnerable* countries to climate change (Kreft et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). 'Vulnerability' in relation to climate change refers to 'the degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change, including climate variability and extremes' (IPCC, 2007: 6).

The South-East region of Guatemala is part of the 'dry corridor' of Central America, a tropical dry-forest region on the Pacific Coast, which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted will expand (Rivera, 2020). Guatemala has always had variable weather patterns, but this variability has significantly increased there in the last decades, and its susceptibility to drought has been aggravated (Castellanos, 2020). Furthermore, the country's climate is affected by the El Niño Southern Oscillation, a cyclical weather pattern which can

increase temperatures and decrease rainfall. El Niño events prolong the *canicula*, a break in the rainy season in July and August (Rivera, 2020). In 2014, drought led to a *canicula* lasting 45 days continuously without rain, and in 2015/2016 Central America experienced one of its worst droughts in 35 years (Ibid.).

It is clear that climate change exacerbates existing environmental challenges and multiplies the threat of extreme weather events in Guatemala, however it is not a solely environmental issue. Droughts, for example, drastically affect harvests, compounding economic insecurity, levels of malnutrition and starvation. Climate change is intertwined with basic human rights issues such as access to food and water, and further compounded in Guatemala by factors such as discriminatory land distribution, degradation of natural resources and political corruption (Guerenha, 2016; Hite and Montenegro, 2020; CICIG, 2018). Social and economic inequalities in Guatemala are exacerbated by climate change, and the people impacted most are the diverse Indigenous Mayan communities who live largely in rural areas and rely heavily on subsistence farming and native forests (TWP, 2020).

1.3: Climate change responses: Mitigation and Adaptation

The literature regarding climate change policy distinguishes between *mitigation* and *adaptation* (see for example Nyong et al., 2007; OECD, 2010). Mitigation refers to the prevention of further worsening of the climate crisis, often focused on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2014: 4). However, a singular focus on mitigation downplays the experiences of those already being negatively impacted by climate change and is symptomatic of a Western-centric narrative. There has been an emerging focus on climate justice in the literature, and an increased recognition of the need for policy that focuses on CCA (Nachmany et al., 2019: 2). In its 4th Assessment Report, the IPCC (2007: 6) defines CCA as ‘an adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities.’

A mix of mitigation and adaptation-focused policy is required to respond to the threat of climate change, but this study focuses on adaptation. NGOs are well suited to responding to climate change and promote CCA locally, however, it is important that they interact with communities and approach their projects in an ethical, non-intrusive way. This study looks to analyse the approaches of the NGOs studied, to see how they view their role in CCA and interact with Guatemalan communities.

Section 2: Research Design

When designing the present research, I was considerate of my positionality. Interviews were conducted in English, which was not the first language of some of the interviewees, although this was acknowledged beforehand, and full consent was received. I am also mindful that as a student attending an elite university in the UK, my day to day experiences may be very different to those of the Guatemalan citizens affected by the climate change to which my research refers. It was important that I avoided contributing to scholarship that omits the voices of those being studied. Therefore, qualitative interviews with representatives of the non-profit NGOs being discussed were pivotal to my research.

Furthermore, it was important to avoid conducting purely extractive research. Extractive practices are embedded in the history of Guatemala: the country underwent a colonial period from 1524 to 1821, and Western forces continued to interfere directly with the country's politics right up until 1996, when the civil war ended (Webre, 2019; TWP, 2020). Research, especially when its focus is vulnerable populations, is highly susceptible to being an extractive and oppressive process itself (Bhattacharya, K. 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 2; Smith, 2012). Therefore, I have, and will continue to come up with ways that I can use my research relationships and outputs to benefit those that I have collaborated with - the first step being sharing this report and the accompanying poster for their reading or use. Although the research is based on the interviewees' own answers and information, I hope that the comparisons between different NGOs will prove interesting and useful.

2.1: Sampling and choosing participants

My criteria for choosing potential participants to contact necessitated that they be officials from non-profit NGOs with projects in Guatemala related to CCA. These could be international organisations or grassroots Guatemalan organisations, though I prioritised the latter in order to amplify local voices. There was some inherent sampling bias, as I was focused on finding organisations that were self-aware of their methodologies and approaches. The result was five officials who represent four organisations – a mix of international and grassroots:

1. Jesse Festa - **Resilient Central America Program (ResCA)** Coordinator for Latin America

2. Jorge Cardona – Coordinator of **ResCA Guatemala**
3. Sara Hurtarte – Co-executive director of **SERES**
4. Gemara Gifford – International Director of **Trees, Water & People (TWP)**
5. Emilio Bulux – Program coordinator at **Helvetas Guatemala**

Please see Appendix B for summaries of the missions of each organisation, and links to their websites for further information.

2.2: Research Method

I conducted online, qualitative interviews with each participant which lasted between thirty and fifty minutes. The interviews were semi-structured as I created an interview guide which comprised a list of themes for discussion. The guide was tailored slightly for the different interviews and sent to each participant in advance. The structure of the interview was flexible and flowed according to the natural order of conversation.

2.3: Method of Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded with the full consent of the participant, and transcribed verbatim in order to most accurately represent their responses. I then conducted thematic content analysis, identifying common themes across the data gathered. I chose to conduct the analysis inductively (without a pre-determined framework of themes), in order to restrict the impact my biases would have on the research. I had three overarching questions to discuss, as set out in Section 1.1, and below.

Section 3: Research Findings

Sub-topic (a): How the NGOs design and implement CCA-focused projects

Theme 1: Collaboration with other local organisations

A common theme amongst all five interviewees was that partnering with other local organisations is a key part of their approaches. Jorge Cardona and Jesse Festa described how

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) which leads the ResCA project do not work directly with communities, but through other local organisations. Jorge took care to highlight that partnering with local organisations is always a completely mutual decision – nothing would be imposed from either side of the partnership but rather they would only work together in areas where their interests and plans overlap.

Similarly, Gemara Gifford highlighted that TWP work with 6-8 community-based partners in Central America, which are organisations they've identified have a 'common philosophy.' Their relationships begin with an informal process of getting to know each other, before becoming formalised partnerships that can last between 5-15 years – or as long as they add value to each other and the community. One of TWP's Guatemalan partners is a forestry organisation called Utz Che', which Gemara described as a grassroots, community-led network representing about 200,000 indigenous people with a 'key mission and desire to protect forests.'

Sara Hurtarte similarly described how SERES also often carry out their leadership-based projects with youth groups that are already formed and working with other local NGOs.

Partnering with local organisations is an important step to ensure that NGOs begin their work in communities in a way that strengthens existing needs, rather than imposing their own views as has been done in the past, and still is done today by some development organisations. Partnering with other organisations in the same area and complementing their efforts is also key to maximising the effectiveness and coordination of different projects.

Theme 2: Community-led approach/philosophy

Theme 1's discussion of partnerships demonstrates that the organisations are considerate about beginning work in a community in a collaborative, rather than intrusive way. A further important theme is that the organisations represented appear to be passionate that the way in which they design and implement their projects should be participatory and community-led.

Jesse Festa highlighted that the ResCA project works mainly with community leaders who have already shown willingness to adopt sustainable and adaptive agricultural practices. Jesse highlighted that 'an outside organisation shouldn't be the ones telling communities and farmers, this is what you should be doing' and explained that working with willing leaders

facilitates community-taught CCA: other Guatemalans in that community hear and see for themselves how adaptive agricultural practices work on a plot of land.

Gemara Gifford echoed a similar sentiment, stating that local voices, knowledge and experience are at the centre of TWP's philosophy. At the very foundation of their work are efforts to 'decolonise' conservation and development practices which Gemara highlighted have historically often been top-down. As Gemara asserted, 'local people really know what is best for them, and it's as easy as that.' In line with this philosophy, much of TWP's work involves strengthening existing efforts to protect natural resources amongst communities in Guatemala. Gemara estimated that around 90% of the communities TWP work with are already highly aware of climate change and the importance of their natural resources.

The theme of projects being community led was also highlighted in my interview with Sara Hurtarte of SERES who informed me that one avenue through which SERES meets young people to work with is through them being referred by previous youth programme participants. Sara highlighted that the organisation 'don't want to be the ones leading the actions, we want to push our leaders for them to be the ones leading some of the actions.' It was clear that SERES do not see their role as being to advocate for young people, but to support them with leadership training and confidence to advocate for themselves.

Sub-topic (b): How the organisations create sustainable, positive impact

Interviewees were prompted with the mention of dependency and questions about how they could ensure their impacts were sustainable.

Theme 1: Strengthening of infrastructure – social and physical

Gemara Gifford of TWP highlighted that their community-led philosophy, as well as being ethical and decolonising practice, ensures the continuation of the organisation's projects beyond the timeframe of their direct involvement with a community. Communities are equipped with skills such as managing organic gardens and tree nurseries which they can continue when TWP move elsewhere. Gemara said:

‘We want to... really hit head-on the perhaps ugly history of the development field which causes a lot of dependency on foreign aid and we’re trying to provide an alternative example of how you can do it in a sustainable way.’

Sara Hurtarte highlighted the lasting social infrastructure that is created from SERES’ projects, in the form of social networks. Sara used an effective analogy of a star vs. a starfish to highlight that SERES do not play the central role in this social network:

‘When you’re in the star model then you’re at the centre, you have all the connections coming out of the centre. If you’re a starfish, you have this connection to another knot, and once you take this one out, all of the others remain connected, and so that is how we see ourselves.’

Jorge Cardona of ResCA similarly highlighted that the skills their project provides people with will last beyond the life of the project, saying that ‘a lot of municipalities have strong tools that they will be able to continue policies if they want to.’ Jorge also referred to the role of physical infrastructure such as cold rooms to store fruit, and non-industrial greenhouses in ensuring that communities are empowered to continue adaptive agricultural practices. In terms of the sustainability of the ResCA project as a whole, Jesse Festa acknowledged that they were very hopeful, but not yet certain, as analysis on the long-term sustainability of the project had yet to be completed and the project ends in 2020.

Emilio Bulux highlighted that relationships between Indigenous people in rural areas and the private sector, which Helvetas help build, are long-lasting due to the project’s ‘business network’ methodology and market system development (MSD) approach. Part of the business network methodology involves small producers becoming members of a larger company, and MSD involves municipalities, governments and companies co-investing in the project, ensuring that it continues in the long run.

Sub-topic (c): Contextual constraints faced by the organisations in Guatemala

Theme 1: Political changes

Jesse Festa articulated that, ‘one of the challenges that we have seen in Central America and in Guatemala is a new administration comes in and kind of changes all of the staff... that’s a challenge to ensure the permanence of who we’re training.’ He also mentioned that at the municipal level, mayors are often changing. This statement gives insight into the difficulty of ensuring the continuation of the project’s impact. Gemara Gifford also referenced the changes in administrations being a challenge to establishing consistent relationships.

Jesse noted that a way of mitigating this challenge is to train and build relationships with more junior staff who are sometimes less tied to a political party than senior staff, to ensure some of the ‘institutional strengthening’ they are doing can last beyond political changes. Jorge added that the start of a political term is a window of opportunity to have an influence on new policy and government officials. Emilio Bulux noted that it was important to have written contracts of collaboration with the government ministries, otherwise changes in politics could negatively impact their work.

Theme 2: Gender inequality

Emilio Bulux referred to the *machismo* that exists in Guatemala and constrains Helvetas Guatemala’s projects. The project that Emilio discussed involved connecting smallholders with bigger companies, and an element of this focuses on empowering women. Emilio described how many Guatemalan women must ask men for permission and money, and it is difficult for them to become involved with different projects. He highlighted that the role of men needs to be considered if organisations wish to specifically work with women. Sara Hurtarte similarly mentioned that one of the reasons SERES didn’t create their project solely focused towards women is that ‘sometimes you leave behind the role of the men in women empowerment.’

Gemara Gifford described sexism as her ‘biggest barrier’, especially being a woman working in the field. She emphasised that because of the deeply embedded gender inequality in Guatemala, it takes a lot of time to build relationships with men and convince them of the need for programmes focused on women.

Theme 3: Social inequality

Gemara mentioned that racism against Indigenous peoples in Guatemala is extremely pervasive, which contributes to their experiences of inadequate attention from government or in policy. Similarly, both Jorge and Emilio believed that well-off people living in the cities, including government officials, were not adequately concerned with the threats and effects of climate change, which highlights that inequality in Guatemala impacts CCA. The people who hold most political power are distanced from the reality of how climate change is affecting livelihoods and living conditions.

Section 4: Conclusion

The NGOs represented in my research have different missions and work in different regions of Guatemala, with varying subsets of communities. This does not facilitate direct comparison. However, each organisation promotes CCA in some way. The normative ethical framework of climate justice highlights the relationship between climate change and social and economic inequality and development, which can explain how the different organisations have this common focus.

The effectiveness of CCA projects should be assessed, particularly in light of the most recent report by the World Economic Forum (2020) which identified ‘failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation’ as being the number one global risk in terms of impact and number two in terms of likelihood over the next decade. This is also the timeframe for the sustainable development goals to be met, which are tied to climate change action (Climate & SDGS Synergy Conference, 2019). I learned from my interviews that the NGOs discussed measure their impacts in different ways, but not to the extent they would wish, due to constraints on funding and resources. Future research could further analyse the effectiveness of NGOs in creating adaptive capacities amongst communities.

Although adaptation and the role of NGOs has been the focus of this research, this is not to diminish the responsibility of governmental actors in Guatemala, or the significant responsibility of the West in the pursuit of climate justice. Further research could analyse the role of governmental actors and policies in Guatemala or focus on the connection between Indigenous peoples’ rights and climate change.

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Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter

Dear Laoise

Thank you for submitting your ethical application which was considered at the School Ethics Committee meeting on the 6 May 2020.

The School of International Relations Committee, acting on behalf of the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC), has approved this application:

Approval Code:	IR14928	Approved on:	9/06/2020	Approval Expiry:	9/06/2025
Project Title:	An evaluation of the link between climate change and forced migration from Guatemala to the USA, and domestic and international responses to these issues, as a case study of the growing phenomenon.				
Researcher(s):	Laoise Rogers				
Supervisor(s):	Prof Ali Watson				

The following supporting documents are also acknowledged and approved:

1. Participant Information Sheet
2. Participant Consent Form
3. Participant Debrief
4. Interim risk filter form in response to COVID-19

Approval is awarded for 5 years, see the approval expiry data above.

If your project has not commenced within 2 years of approval, you must submit a new and updated ethical application to your School Ethics Committee.

If you are unable to complete your research by the approval expiry date you must request an extension to the approval period. You can write to your School Ethics Committee who may grant a discretionary extension of up to 6 months. For longer extensions, or for any other changes, you must submit an ethical amendment application.

You must report any serious adverse events, or significant changes not covered by this approval, related to this study immediately to the School Ethics Committee.

Approval is given on the following conditions:

- that you conduct your research in line with:
 - the details provided in your ethical application
 - the University's [Principles of Good Research Conduct](#)
 - the conditions of any funding associated with your work
- that you obtain all applicable additional documents (see the ['additional documents' webpage](#) for guidance) before research commences. You should retain this approval letter with your study paperwork.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Diego Muro
Convenor of Ethics Committee

Cc Prof Ali Watson

Appendix B – Participants and summaries of their organisations’ missions and projects

1. Jesse Festa - **Resilient Central America Program (ResCA)** Coordinator for Latin America

ResCA is a programme led by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a ‘global environmental non-profit’, impacting conservation in 79 countries. ResCA involves five countries in Central America, but particularly focuses on the afore-mentioned dry corridor, which includes a significant region of Guatemala. ResCA is made up of seven projects, with the overall view to promote food security and climate change resilience. Jesse Festa sits on the regional agriculture team and is the project manager.

Websites: <https://www.resilientcentralamerica.org/>
<https://www.nature.org/en-us/>

2. Jorge Cardona – Coordinator of **ResCA Guatemala**

Jorge is coordinator of the specific Guatemala branch of ResCA and complemented Jesse’s interview by giving greater detail on their work in Guatemala, as well as insights into other projects directed by The Nature Conservancy. In Guatemala, the team work in five departments of the Western Highlands in the dry corridor and promote sustainable agricultural processes in different value chains including coffee, vegetables and sheep farming.

Websites: as above

3. Sara Hurtarte – Co-executive director of **SERES**

SERES is a grassroots organisation with a mission to ‘cultivate and catalyse youth leaders to build more just and sustainable communities in Guatemala and El Salvador.’ SERES has several projects relating to strengthening the skills and confidence of young leaders in Guatemala to stand up for their rights and beliefs, some of which relate to climate change. SERES also work with farmers in Guatemala to promote adaptive agricultural practices.

Website: <https://www.seres.org/>

4. Gemara Gifford – International Director of **Trees, Water & People (TWP)**

TWP is an international programme focused on four countries in CA, including rural Guatemala. It is a small organisation with a ‘grassroots lens’, and staff are mostly indigenous or of mixed ancestry, with a deep connection to the communities they work with. They are funded largely by grassroots donors and aim to ‘work closely with [our] local partners to co-design holistic programs that emphasize reforestation, improved cookstoves, sustainable agriculture, water security, biodiversity monitoring, and women's leadership.’

Website: <https://treeswaterpeople.org>

5. Emilio Bulux – Program coordinator at **Helvetas Guatemala**

Helvetas is an international development organisation, based in Switzerland. Helvetas Guatemala works with people in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, to improve their living conditions and income. Emilio Bulux leads a project called PRODERT IXOQIB’ which helps vulnerable rural populations, especially Indigenous women, create sustainable relationships with the private sector and aims to improve their market access. Whilst this project is quite different to the other ones mentioned, as it is more focussed on economic

development and the private sector, Emilio gave useful insight into how they promote sustainability and how adaptation is interlinked with economic development.

Website: <https://www.helvetas.org/es/guatemala/quienes-somos/Programa-Guatemala>