

GUATEMALA CASE STUDY

Note: Please be aware of the situation of children in your class before delivering this activity. If there are children in your class who have become homeless or have been forced to move from their homes for any reason, check in with them or their parents in advance.



Aim

Develop a sense of empathy and understanding with Indigenous communities in Guatemala who suffer from human rights abuses.



Resources

Guatemala
Case Study



Time

45–60
minutes

Guatemala is a country in Central America. It is home to nearly seventeen million people.

The population of Guatemala is mainly formed by people who came from Spain a long time ago and **Indigenous** Mayan people. The word 'Guatemala' comes from a Mayan word that means 'land of the trees'. The land is very important for the Mayan people. Living on the land is an important part of **traditional** Mayan culture. The land is where they live, grow food, play and gather together as a **community**.

María and her family live in the Polochic Valley in eastern Guatemala. This has been the home of the Maya Q'eqchi' (kekchee) people for hundreds of



María playing with her nephew, Joel, outside her home.
Photo credit: Manuel Morillo.

years. María loves to play games with her family and friends. The children in her village play outside much more than they play inside. In the centre of María's village is a small river. The river is a very important place for the community because it is the place where the women and children gather to work and to chat. An important job that María does at the river is rinsing the **maize** that will be used to make tortillas, which is the main food for María's family. Maize is grown by María's father and brothers in their milpa, which is a field near their house. After the maize is harvested, it is soaked in lime water, which makes it healthier to eat. The lime water is rinsed off in the river, and then the maize is ground into flour to make **tortillas**.

Human rights are universal and belong to everyone. This means that everyone in Guatemala should have the same rights; however, some **native** families and communities don't have the right to live safely on the land that they have lived on for generations. Large businesses, such as mining companies and palm oil and sugar cane **plantations**, want to use this land to make big profits. To allow these companies to move in and take over, people who work for the government are sent in huge numbers to **evict** hundreds of families from their land. Lots of violence, including tear gas, is used to force the families, like María's family, out of their homes. Some people get

seriously injured when this happens. These families are not given the chance to have their say or opinion to decide what happens to their land.

For a long time the Guatemalan government has attacked and bullied native communities to get lots of new land. They allow big businesses to take over this land from native communities so they can make big **profits**. The demand around the world for materials such as palm oil, sugar cane and nickel means that these companies can make big profits. Companies who supply these materials are looking for more and more ways to meet this demand, even if it means damage is caused to people and the environment. Is this fair?



Children walking in the Polochic Valley.
Photo credit: Manuel Morillo.

Activity 1

As a whole class, discuss the meanings of the words highlighted in bold.

Activity 2

The river is a very important place for María's community. It is the place where neighbours and friends gather together to work, chat and play. Do you have an important place in your community? Write three short paragraphs using the following as a guide:

- Describe your favourite place.
- Why is this place special for you?
- How would you feel if you were stopped from visiting this place?

Activity 3

Land is an important part of how we live our lives. Physically, we use land to grow food for survival. Socially, we play with friends and family outdoors. Culturally, land influences our customs and traditions, our music and stories. Working in pairs, discuss the following and note your responses.

- If tomorrow you received an eviction order to leave your homeland, how would you feel?
- What ten items would you pack? For example, one pair of trousers, one t-shirt, one jumper, one mobile phone.
- What five things (places, people, personal items) would you miss the most? Why?
- Do you think it is fair that some people get pushed off their land? Why or why not?

Activity 4

Indigenous families in Guatemala have been forced off their land by big businesses who want the land to plant trees to make palm oil and produce materials such as sugar cane and nickel. Split the class into groups. Assign one of the following themes to each group: palm oil; sugar cane; nickel. Each group should research their theme by answering the related questions below, then share their findings with the rest of the class.

<p>Palm oil</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What is palm oil? What is palm oil used for? Write down ten items that contain palm oil. 	<p>Sugar cane</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What is sugar cane? What is sugar cane used for? Where can you grow sugar cane? 	<p>Nickel</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What is nickel? What is nickel used for? Write down five items that contain nickel. 
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Extension Activity

Families are pushed off their land so that big corporations can operate their businesses. Do you think the products made by these businesses should be sold in Ireland?

Write a short letter to your TD or MP saying that you don't want to buy products that have been produced on land or come from land where families have been evicted. Explain your reasons. Use the following points to guide and help you:

- Who you are (age, class) and what school you attend.
 - Explain the issue: families are being evicted to accommodate big businesses in Guatemala. Who is it happening to? What exactly is happening? For how long has it been happening in Guatemala? Why is it happening? How is it happening?
 - What can we do here at home to help the issue?
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