

CHILDREN OF CHANGE

Gang warfare, corruption and civil unrest have made Guatemala one of the most deprived countries in the world. But a small group of NGOs are trying to help its families to change the future of their country. Report and photographs by **Lottie Davies**

My friend Carlos told me a story: if you trap frogs in a bucket, they will find a way to help each other to escape. But if the frogs are Guatemalan, they will wait for one to find his way to the top, so that the rest of them can pull him back down. Guatemala has been in crisis for so long that most of its people have lost the will even to hope for change. The country is facing what Amnesty International has termed 'human rights meltdown'. It has the highest level of chronic malnutrition in Central America and 34 per cent of children work.

Exhausted by 32 years of civil war, Guatemala is also suffering a 'pandemic of violence'. Every week up to 60 people die violently and tension on the streets is constant – even Coca-Cola vendors are armed. Guns can be bought for just £5, but once you have one, you are no less likely to

FAMILIES CAN ONLY ESCAPE POVERTY VIA EDUCATION, BUT MANY CANNOT AFFORD THE BOOKS AND UNIFORMS

be shot at yourself – security guards on their way to work are often killed for their weapons.

This fear is created mostly by street gangs, or *maras*, which have been growing since gang culture was brought here by Guatemalans deported from Los Angeles in the 1980s. There are about 298,000 gang members in two rival factions, the Mara 18 and the Salvatruce, who are effectively holding the country to ransom with extortion, robbery and killing. In addition, Guatemala's northern border is crucial to the cocaine trail to the US, giving Colombian drug cartels incentive to distribute bribes along the way to influence the authorities. Policing is ineffectual, the judicial system is chronically weak, backed by a government in which no one has any faith.

In common with all Central American republics, there is a vast disparity between rich and poor. Just 12 families own most of the land and

Right Raymundo, Georgiana, Ana-Sofia, 12, Andres, 9, Teresa, 15, and Pedro, 17. Raymundo's family live in a two-room house near the city's rubbish dump, where they have worked for 15 years, collecting tyres, plastic bottles, clothes – anything that can be resold. They all used to work in the dump, but in the past five years the children have been able to go to school thanks to the charity Safe Passage. Between them they make £25 a week. 'Thank God the children will have a different life to us,' Sofia says. 'They have a future.'



businesses in Guatemala, making it the most unequal wealth distribution in Latin America. You might think that the well-off would escape the consequences of violence so widespread among the poor, but they are equally affected. The threat of car-jacking, armed robbery and kidnapping is so strong that most wealthy Guatemalans travel with security guards. Child kidnapping is common, so all private schools have armed guards, and children sprint from car to schoolgates.

For poor families, the most immediate worry is how to eat. More than 60 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. Families can escape only via education, but although primary schooling is free, many parents cannot afford the uniforms and books required for attendance. Of the few children in school, only three in 10 achieve secondary level.

A society using violence as its primary means of communication will continue to do so unless a new generation learns a different way of life. And there



Above Bryon, 22, Gladys and Gladysita, 7. Gladys has been living on the street since she was 15. Bryon has been on the street since he was five. He and Gladys are living in her sister's house, trying to get off the streets by selling gum, pens and postcards. When Gladys had her daughter the social workers advised her to give her up, saying, 'She'll be dead in three days anyway.' But Gladys refused, believing the woman wanted to sell the baby. *Robachicos*, or 'baby stealers', traffick newborn babies to the US for up to \$30,000.

Above right Dora, 56, Claudia, 35, Jonathan, 16, Randy, 12, Kevin, 9, Eric, 8, Claudia, 6, Paula, 3, and Lubin, 2. Dora shares two rooms in a hostel with her daughter Claudia and her grandchildren. Claudia is pregnant with her eighth child. The children's father has left. Claudia often leaves too. 'I hang out with my friends, smoke crack, relax...' The eldest boys have spent time sniffing solvents but, Claudia says, 'Casa Alianza has stopped them sniffing and given them some education.' The family sell sweets and eat once a day at a soup kitchen.

Right Maria, 40, Manuela, 17, Vilma, 9, Wilson, 4, and Eddy, 18 months. The family live 50 miles from the city, but travel in every day by bus, two hours each way. They buy fresh fruit, which they cut up and sell for 15p a bag, making about £10 a day. More than half of the population are indigenous people of Mayan origin who live in rural areas with little access to education or healthcare.



are people working to bring this about. Casa Alianza is an NGO that aims to get children off the streets. Their 'street educators' visit children, talking to them about a more stable existence, and offering them a place in its residential homes. Fotokids provides after-school teaching in photography and design skills, as well as food and clothing. Safe Passage has helped more than 540 children into education. In return for regular attendance at after-school classes, children earn uniforms, shoes and books, and every month their families are given a bag of staples such as beans and rice, giving them an incentive to keep the children in education.

If there is any hope for Guatemala, it has to be through its children. With help, the country might just be able to pull itself into a better future; one family, one child at a time.

Safe Passage: safepassage.org; 00 502 7832 8428. Casa Alianza: casa-alianza.co.uk; 01536-526447. Fotokids: fotokids.org; 00 502 2470 1333



Above left Jose, 40, Paulina, 40, Josefa, 24, Eitel, 7, and Catherine, 4. Jose's family have lived in Guatemala City for 24 years. He collects plastic at the dump, making £3 a day. His eldest daughter Josefa has built a two-storey home of corrugated iron with her husband and daughter. Jose and Paulina live with their youngest daughter, Eitel further down the hill. Jose struggles to send her to school. School books are £5 every month.

Above Juan Carlos, 28, and Claudia, 20, Jonathan, 18 months, and Juan Carlos's mother. Juan Carlos and Claudia live in a nearby hotel at a cost of £4 per day. When they can't afford the room, they sleep in the park, and Juan Carlos's mother looks after Jonathan. At 10, Juan Carlos was hanging out with a notorious street gang. He has been in jail and shot four times. From his right eye fall two tattooed tears, marking his first kills. 'If I'd continued with the tattoos, my face would be covered now.' He supports his family by selling pens on buses.

Left Susana, 46, Elsie, 26, and Georlene, 4. Of all the families I visited, Susana's seemed the happiest. She sold tamales, while Elsie ran a small grocery. Some weeks after my visit, I heard that all three of them had moved back to El Salvador, where Susana is from. A gang had demanded protection money (£400 a week) for the shop, and £100 a week for the tamale business. If they didn't pay, they were told all three would be raped and killed. Unable to sell the shop or house, they left.