



Asociación La Alianza in Combating Human Trafficking

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Background

Guatemala is on the Tier 2 Watch List, a list of countries that “do not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of [human] trafficking but are making significant efforts to do so”, according to Nation Master (2013). This report specifically focuses on the trafficking of young women and minors both in forced agricultural and domestic labor, as well as sexual slavery. More than ten thousand Guatemalans are at risk each year of becoming victims of human trafficking. “Guatemala is a source, transit, and destination country” for human trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2012). One organization that aims to improve this situation is Asociación La Alianza (formerly called Casa Alianza and so called in other countries). It shelters homeless youth displaced by the civil war and human trafficking victims. It also works to legally combat human trafficking in Guatemala.

In 2011, Asociación La Alianza reported sheltering and rehabilitating over thirty girls within months and training over six thousand government officials and local citizens to engage in advocating for anti-trafficking laws (Casa Alianza, 2013a). This initial progress from ALA suggests that the program is impactful, and I believe it should work towards advocating for more funding to be allocated to honorable police units to fight against human trafficking in Guatemala.

Methods

ALA uses a four-pronged approach— “public education, public policy advocacy, a residential program for child victims of trafficking, and legal advocacy on behalf of individual victims”—in their fight against human trafficking (Casa Alianza, 2013b). ALA combats human trafficking by providing public education regarding human trafficking to public officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and communities. ALA’s community involvement includes hosting workshops in multiple regions to educate public officials, community leaders and citizens about human trafficking warning signs, dangers, and prevention methods. Many parents, youth leaders, and children attend these workshops and in turn, are asked to continue to disseminate information regarding trafficking to other communities and community members in order to further their outreach. Asociación La Alianza also openly promotes a public policy campaign within communities to advocate for advancements in policy against trafficking.

ALA initially began as a shelter for the thousands of children rendered homeless due to the Guatemalan civil war, and proceeds now as a shelter more specifically for victims of human trafficking. They provide psychological services and rehabilitation to begin to address the trauma the victims have experienced (La Alianza, 2013). The program’s goal is to help the victims smoothly integrate back into society and reunite them with their families. The victims participated in a multi-stepped program that helps them to gradually stabilize through adherence to a more structured lifestyle, then gain confidence and skills to rejoin the school system, and finally prepare to rejoin society more fully with local employment and their families.

Asociación La Alianza also broadly approaches their work with youth in a multidisciplinary fashion, including front-line [individual] staff counselors, medical care, psychological support, social work, addiction treatment, sexuality and HIV/AIDS education and awareness, personalized spiritual support, and entertainment through arts, culture, recreation and sports. (Casa Alianza, 2013a).

Another program of ALA, the street team outreach, is a ministry and counseling program for teens and youth living in risky and vulnerable areas; it helps youth build realistic methods of transition from their lives on the street.

Figure 1: Guatemala is on the Tier 2 Watch List, a list of countries that “do not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of [human] trafficking but are making significant efforts to do so.”

TIER 2			
AFGHANISTAN	EAST TIMOR	LATVIA	RWANDA
ALBANIA	ECUADOR	LESOTHO	SENEGAL
ANGOLA	EL SALVADOR	MACEDONIA	SERBIA-MONTENEGRO
AZERBAIJAN	ESTONIA	MADAGASCAR	SIERRA LEONE
BANGLADESH	ETHIOPIA	MALI	SLOVAK REPUBLIC
BELARUS	GABON	MALTA	SLOVENIA
BENIN	THE GAMBIA	MAURITIUS	SRI LANKA
BOSNIA-HERZ	GEORGIA	MOLODOVA	SURINAME
BULGARIA	GHANA	MONGOLIA	TAJIKISTAN
BURUNDI	GREECE	MOZAMBIQUE	TANZANIA
BURUNDI	GUATEMALA	NEPAL	THAILAND
CAMEROON	GUINEA	NICARAGUA	TUNISIA
CHAD	GUINEA-BISSAU	NIGER	TURKEY
CHILE	HONDURAS	NIGERIA	UGANDA
CONGO (BRC)	HUNGARY	PAKISTAN	UKRAINE
COSTA RICA	COTE D'IVOIRE	PANAMA	URUGUAY
CROATIA	JORDAN	PARAGUAY	VIETNAM
CZECH REPUBLIC	KAZAKHSTAN	PHILIPPINES	YEMEN
DOMINICAN REP.	KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	PORTUGAL	ZAMBIA
		ROMANIA	



Figure 2 (above): Asociación La Alianza shelters and rehabilitates youth victims of human trafficking.

Figure 3 (below): Asociación La Alianza trains government officials and local citizens to protect children from human trafficking.



Results

In 2011, ALA sheltered 30 female victims and rehabilitated them from the various hardships they had faced as a result of being involved in human trafficking. Furthermore, in a rescue mission in 2004, Casa Alianza investigators discovered “688 girls from Central America [were] victims of commercial sexual exploitation in 284 establishments such as bars, brothels and massage parlors in different Guatemalan cities,” while the actual numbers of victims enslaved are expected to be far worse (Casa Alianza, 2004; Casa Alianza, 2013a). Most of these girls were minors aged thirteen to seventeen years old. The Casa Alianza investigators posed as clients in order to interview the victims, and discovered that many were Central Americans who were exploited by their illegal smugglers en route to the United States. exploited by their illegal smugglers en route to the United States. With the training of more than 6,000 government officials and local citizens in advocating for anti-trafficking laws in 2011, ALA continues their emphasis on the importance of policies to protect these vulnerable young people. Asociación La Alianza has now made groundbreaking progress by initiating a meeting between the Guatemalan Attorney General and the entire National Coalition Against Trafficking, while also working toward collaborations with other related agencies. The group has supported trafficked victims in legal cases and prepared them to testify against their traffickers (Casa Alianza, 2013a). Casa Alianza has “filed in excess of 1,000 cases of human rights abuses of children, including murder and torture yet very few have been investigated,” proving that the Guatemalan government has failed to recognize Casa Alianza’s efforts (Casa Alianza, 2013b). Through this progress, however, ALA has been able to form “partnerships with civil society organizations and governmental ministries” to further combat human trafficking (Casa Alianza, 2013b).

Casa Alianza has also released multiple informal case studies regarding the well-being of the Guatemalan youth who have been under care at ALA. “Hugo,” a young man who was living on the streets as a child with an alcoholic family and had drug and alcohol problems, was taken in by ALA’s education program and now attends a private university in Guatemala (Casa Alianza, 2013b). “Alicia” suffered domestic violence and was deceived into entering prostitution at age fourteen. She then spiraled into drug addictions and became pregnant, and was eventually rescued during a raid organized by ALA. She was referred to Casa Alianza and is now prospering in its Mother and Baby Program while attending school and setting and achieving life goals.

Conclusions

This program works to alter governance in Guatemala by training government officials and advocating for policy changes regarding human trafficking. It specifically trains sectors of the National Police to combat trafficking and encourage military to augment these forces. Furthermore, ALA addresses material circumstances by giving the victims shelter and health treatments, while addressing psychosocial factors such as mental well-being after victimization and preparing them to most successfully reintegrate into society.

Limitations of evaluations/research findings

Most of the information provided discloses that ALA rescued, housed and treated certain numbers of people, but provides scarce insight on the mental and physical health of the victims later on. The NGO itself, rather than external organizations, provided evaluation on its goals. As seen above, ALA’s effective reach is limited by inactivity on the government’s side, but ALA advocates are working to change those shortcomings. Though the organization is already supported by UNICEF, it could gain a higher reputation if case studies regarding the overall health and well-being of victims being treated and housed at Casa Alianza were developed, published, and peer-reviewed.

Scaling Up

ALA’s work could be taken further nationally by expanding honorable police forces in Guatemala and by advocating for more ALA funding to support branches of the shelter in other trafficking hot-spot countries. The police force expansion would likely have to continue through enlisting additional military units to execute brothel raids. Human trafficking is prevalent in surrounding Central and South American countries, so expansion would be relevant and impactful. Yet, challenges arise, including cultural views and stigmatization towards victims of sex trafficking, and thus limit community urgency and concern about this issue (Casa Alianza, 2004). To further impede this typed of programming elsewhere, researchers have asserted that “how violence is defined has very practical implications for policy and legal matters” as well as “social reactions to violence” (Howard, Hume, Oslender, 2007, p. 717). These researchers add that people have become desensitized to violence against humans, instead focusing on issues such as violence against property. IF this bears to be true for South American populations, this will make the advancement of public policy for preventing human trafficking more difficult in those nations. Further, corruption in the police force is prevalent in Guatemala, as well as many other countries in the region, and will continue to be a challenge until more seriously addressed at the local and national levels.

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