

Greetings from Sayaxche, Guatemala!

Community Newsletter ♦ November 2011

Dear Sponsor,

Welcome to this newsletter from the Sayaxche community, in the heart of the Mayan world! It is my pleasure to share with you the latest news about ActionAid's work here, as well as more information about what it's like to live in Sayaxche.

I am very proud to share two new projects with you in this report – one which is focusing on improving the school environment for children in a small village in Sayaxche. And another which is helping women to understand nutrition for their children and develop new farming skills and a variety of different crops. Santos is one of 32 women taking part in the pilot programme, and explains how exciting it is for women to be given this opportunity to change their lives.

I leave it to local father Francisco Sacul, to explain what your support means to people here: "We in this community are aware that these funds have come from special people from a distant country [UK]. We are very grateful to them because they care for us even though they have never met us. This support encourages every family here to take part in projects and do our best to change our community."

Thank you so much for your support.


Wendy Pacay

Sponsorship Manager
ActionAid Guatemala

"I keep my postcard at home in a special place"

Seven year old Debora Saqui said: "I am so happy to get this card from my friend because I love to see the photos and see places that exist far away from where I live. I hope that my sponsor has liked all the drawings I have done. I keep my postcard at home in a special place on my wall. My whole family likes to look at it."

As Debora has explained, sponsored children love to receive letters from their sponsors in the UK. If you would like to write to the child you sponsor, please do so using the following address: ActionAid Guatemala P.O. BOX 582A, Guatemala City, Guatemala, C.A. Please simply include your supporter and child reference numbers and we will happily pass these on for you.



Debora loves to receive correspondence from her sponsor in the UK

A community vegetable garden managed by women

In Sayaxche, people depend on agriculture for income. Unfortunately, more than 75% of people here live in poverty. Through meetings with the community, women say that they are the most affected by lack of money in the family – they earn so little from the sale of their corn crops that they cannot afford to buy much more than salt, sugar and oil to supplement their diets, which leads to malnutrition among the children.

ActionAid, and local partner organisation Mayapaz, started a community garden at the beginning of 2011. The aim was to teach local women how to prepare land, protect crops and grow a variety of vegetables instead of just corn. Thirty-two women, including 32-year-old Santos took part in this group pilot scheme.



Santos and the radishes that made up her first harvest!

She says, “It is a dream come true for me. I was worried about my two sons [Benjamin, 10 and Felix, 5] because they were tired and often ill. When I learned that this was caused by their regular diet of black beans and corn tortillas, I wanted to be part of this new project to grow vegetables.

I have been to lots of trainings with the other women on our community garden – we know about using and preparing organic fertiliser and about watering our plants – it’s very important because it is so hot here.

We were all so proud when we harvested our radishes – the first new crop we grew. We all made salads for our children with them. We have also sowed yucca, coriander, chard and hibiscus flowers. I want to keep going with this project and improve the diet of my whole family. Now we have learnt the skills, we are going to make our own vegetable gardens at home, and I will be teaching what I know now to other women in our village.”

My Daily Life...by Yeni Lisett Jaunita Coc Xol

“I am Yeni and I am 11 years old. You can see from these pictures that I am busy all day both at home and at school.

Every day we wake up at 5am. After I wash myself, I wash the corn and prepare the fire to cook it. I make tortillas with my mum and have breakfast with my sister Leydi, and two brothers, Brayan and Keiler. We eat black beans, tortillas – sometimes eggs – and we drink coffee. Then I rinse the dishes and get ready for school [from 7am to 12:30].

I love school. My favourite subject is maths. My friends and I have learned a lot from the talks that people from Mayapz [ActionAid’s partner organisation] have given in school. The last time they talked to us, we learned about stopping violence against children. They’ve also taught us about looking after natural resources, like water and our trees.



Yeni loves being at school

In the afternoon, I help my mum by washing my baby brother – he’s 11 months old. I am in charge of taking care of him while my mum is busy doing other chores. When he goes to sleep in the hammock, I do my homework.

One of the best things in our village that ActionAid has done is the community centre. My parents go there often to talk about the problems in our village. And recently it was used as a vaccination centre. Me and all my friends are proud that we can help make our community a better place by taking part in child sponsorship.”

Yeni bringing corn from the mill so she can help make tortillas for her family



Education in Sayaxche

Education is free but:

- Of the 200 schools in the Petén District only 63 have actual buildings for teaching and learning; most children learn in huts
- Almost half of all adults in Sayaxche are illiterate
- Children speak the Q'eqchi language, but schools only teach in Spanish
- Shortages of staff in rural schools mean each teacher is responsible for three grades

Taking action:

- In the last year, ActionAid has supported the construction of three classrooms.
- Five community centres have also been built – these are multipurpose spaces, including teaching and literacy classes for women
- 800 families from nine communities have benefited from these classroom facilities.



Women are learning to read and write in the new community centre



Arnoldo explains the traditions and beliefs behind corn in Sayaxche

The first men were made of corn

The people of Guatemala have a very special relationship with corn. In the Maya religion, the Gods made the first men of mud, then wood. Neither of these were successful. Finally, the Gods made men of corn. Today, the Mayan people believe their flesh was once made of corn. Their reverence for corn translates in to daily life: no meal is served without some kind of corn, be it small, round tortillas, corn on the cob, corn soup or atoll, which is a thick, milky drink made of corn.

“We sow corn twice a year and it is a special time when our community comes together. For three days, we all meet before the sun rises and have a special breakfast together. It is important that we pray together to thank God for each other and to ask for a good harvest. Then we prepare the land and plant our seeds. We do this in May and October” explains Arnoldo Rax (29).



Improving school infrastructure

“We are so pleased to show you the new roof of our classroom, which was built by ActionAid. It rains very heavy from May until October here and before this new roof, our teachers had to send us home when it rained really hard,” says Edtzon Franciso Jonatan Sacul Cac, who is seven years old.

“There was a big meeting, and everybody went there – my teachers, my parents and me – and it was decided that a roof would fix the problems we faced at school. My dad and other parents took off the old, broken roof and then put on the new metal one. It only took five days. I love going to school now.”

Edtzon helping at home and so happy with the new roof at his school





Joyce and Keith had a magical day in Sayaxche, visiting their sponsored child Maura. If you are interested in making a visit, please phone 01460 23 800 for more information.

Memories from a visit to Nuevo San Fernando

"I am Joyce Berry, and I had been sponsoring 7 year old Maura Caal for about six months when my partner Keith and I planned a visit to the region. We thought it would be a lovely opportunity to visit Maura and her family.

One drizzly day in February 2011, we arrived in Sayaxche to meet fieldworkers Sandra and Marcelino. The last part of the journey was along a bumpy dirt track.

We received the warmest welcome – the entire community had turned out to see us! Although we both speak Spanish, the local language is Q'eqchi, so we relied on Marcelino's excellent translations to understand what was going on.

It was a wonderful moment when we met Maura, who was there with her parents and siblings. Her mother even made a delicious soup for us.

Later we visited other local communities where we could see some of the projects ActionAid is supporting in the area, including a new community centre which the local people are hoping to turn into a social and sporting hub, as well as a school room. This was an unforgettable day for us."

More news thanks to your support!

- 360 families in La Ceiba village took part in training to protect the spring that is their only water source. They learned about preventing contamination of the water, which is used for everything from drinking to washing clothes and dishes.
- 70 women have joined the AgroEcological School programme, which teaches ways to care for natural resources. These women travel once a month to other areas to share and learn from one another.
- 46 female leaders took part in a workshop about violence and racism towards women. They identified ways of stopping maltreatment of women, and will now take these forward in their communities.



A protected water source in Sayaxche, helping to supply safe water for families

Thank you!

I hope you have enjoyed reading this update today and learning about some of the many achievements you have helped to make possible. Until next time, I wish your family well.