

Leonard S. Kenworthy  
Brooklyn College  
Brooklyn 10, N.Y.

Possible titles

Progress Report on Central America  
(R)evolution in Central America  
Life Can Be Better: The Story of Central America  
Central America--Laboratory of Better Living  
Five Basic Needs in Central America

Adobe houses with the letters "D.D.T." painted on their side walls by insect control brigades, school children drinking milk from tin cups or gourds, experimental plots of sesame, castor beans, or some new variety of corn, coffee, or sugar cane, trenches being readied for new water pipes or sewage disposal conduits, and bulldozers scooping up the earth for new and enlarged airports--these are some of the signs of changes taking place today in Central America.

The old picture of that part of the world as an isthmus of revolutions needs to be discarded or retouched. In its place there should be a picture of radical changes being made in the ways of living of the ten million persons in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. These five underdeveloped countries are undergoing a revolution of a non-violent nature, but one which is far more important than any of the violent political revolutions of the past.

These small nations differ greatly, but they have at least five common problems with which they are all wrestling. Individually and collectively they are trying to provide better transportation, better health and housing, better food and agriculture, better power and industrial development, and better education. These five goals of



better living have been adopted by each of these countries in an informal way, just as they long ago adopted the five major volcanoes of Central America as a common symbol.

## I

Transportation may not seem too important to most Americans, but it is of vital importance in places where the backs of human beings or tiny two wheel carts drawn by oxen have served for centuries as the main means of carrying goods to market. In this part of the world a good highway or airport is of prime importance in raising the standards of living of the men and women whose average per capita income ranges from \$60 in Honduras to \$146 in Costa Rica, compared with \$1425 per person in the U.S.A. Consequently each of the Central American republics is working intensively on the problem of transportation.

Honduras has concentrated in recent years on air travel. She is the largest in area and the smallest in population and her citizens are widely scattered. Her quickest and cheapest way of binding them together, providing them with markets inside the country, and of giving them contact with the outside world has been through air transportation. Today there are 75 airports in Honduras. Some of them are little more than open fields, but they serve an important function. Right now intensive work is going on at the airport at Tegucigalpa, the capital city, to make it larger and more efficient.

El Salvador is concentrating on a major highway across the southern part of its territory. This is a major effort and should open up a section of that land which has been isolated for centuries.

Nicaragua is developing a nation-wide system of roads, with financial assistance from the International Bank of the United Nations; and Guatemala is working on several roads fanning out from the capital.

At the moment Costa Rica is putting its greatest effort into the construction of a new airport at El Coco, which will enable more planes and larger ones to serve the capital city of San Jose.



The biggest news in water transportation broke in July of this year in Guatemala when the contract for the construction of a new port at Santo Tomas was signed. Guatemaltecos have felt this was necessary since Atlantic Ocean port at Puerto Barrios, was owned and controlled by the United Fruit Company.

Under the leadership of the Economic Commission for Latin <sup>A</sup>merica of the United Nations, a seminar was held in the summer of 1953 to consider the common problems in transportation of this entire area. In this way an effort is being made to integrate the plans of all these nations for an overall Central <sup>A</sup>merican highway system. At the center of such a plan is the Pan-<sup>A</sup>merican Highway, now about 85 percent completed.

In most of these planning and construction jobs the United States has played an important role, through technical help and through large sums of money for equipment and materials, with the interested nations matching and in some cases more than matching the gifts from the U.S.A.

## II

To anyone who cares about the lives of human beings, health conditions in large parts of Central <sup>A</sup>merica are shocking. For example, the average life expectancy in El Salvador is currently around 30 years, and the figures are similar for most of Central <sup>A</sup>merica. Water supplies are usually bad, infant mortality is very high, a large percentage of children suffer from intestinal parasites. Many pregnant women are ill with severe anemia. So one could continue to enumerate diseases and cite evidence of ill health.

But there is another side to the story, too. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization and its Latin American branch--the Pan-American Sanitary Bureau, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, the Technical Assistance Program of the U.N.; and other groups are vitally interested in improving these bad conditions--and are doing something about it.



And for those who are skeptical about local governments pulling their own oars, the fact should be underlined with heavy pencil lines that they are. For example, El Salvador increased its public health appropriations from 200,000 colones in 1940 to 3,300,000 colones in 1953. Few if any governments in the world could show comparable figures in support of better conditions for their populace. Nicaragua allocated \$128, 160 in 1953-54 for child feeding programs, which represents more than the entire budget of the Ministry of Health five years ago. These are but two examples of the way in which national governments are sharing in the enormous job of providing better health and nutrition for their people.

Among the many programs along these lines the work of UNICEF in the feeding of children has been outstanding. At the height of its program, in 1952, it was feeding dried milk to 300,000 boys and girls, largely through the schools. That was a feat in itself. More important in the long run, however, is the effect UNICEF has had in stimulating national governments and private groups to carry on such work on their own, in encouraging the erection of additional school feeding facilities in schools throughout Central America, in bringing about the training of personnel, in fostering the hiring of nutritionists in several countries, and in focusing attention on the basic problems of food and health.

The problem of improving the water supplies of communities has been tackled by several groups, with the Institute of Inter-American Affairs of the United States government taking an especial interest in it. In Honduras 60 water systems have been built in the last 11 years with the help of the Point 4 program and its predecessors.

Malaria is the most widespread and persistent of all diseases in this area of the world and a vigorous campaign is being waged against it. The World Health Organization and the Pan-American Sanitary Bureau, its



Latin American branch have taken the lead, with very generous allocations from UNICEF. An idea of the extent of this campaign may be gained from the figures from June, 1953, in Honduras, where 4000 houses were sprayed with D.D.T. Such a figure is probably better appreciated when it is realized that supplies in that country often have to be sent in by air-lift and then carried for miles on the backs of mules.

In this project as in others involving the U.S. and U.N. funds, the principle of "matching" outside funds with equivalent amounts by the local government have been maintained.

Meanwhile intensive research is being carried on by the World Health Organization into the control of yellow fever, which has been slowly advancing northward in recent years from South America.

In housing less is being done, but one finds in El Salvador, for example, the completed village of Sitio del Mina as a part of the work of the Institute of Rural Colonization, as well as several urban housing developments. In Guatemala and Costa Rica there is also some housing under government auspices.

### III

Closely allied with such projects in health are equally important developments in food and agriculture. These are often sparked by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; by the Institute of Nutrition for Central America and Panama; by the Institute of Inter-American Affairs of the United States government; or by such private organizations as the United Fruit Company.

Central America is of course the center of banana and coffee plantations and large sections of the population are dependent for their cash income on one crop. Therefore one major problem is to diversify agriculture. Another is to stop erosion and promote soil conservation. A third is to find more protein products to ~~expiement~~ supplement the heavy diet of corn and beans, with some fruits. A fifth is to improve the animals of the area.



Considerable progress can be reported on each of these problems.

In recent years there has been a sizeable increase in the production of cotton in this area, particularly in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Rice production has also had a big spurt in each of the Central American nations, with production in Nicaragua in 1951-52 twenty-five times the output of 1947-48. Guatemala's production increased seven fold in the same period. Sesame, an oil-bearing seed, has now become Nicaragua's third largest export.

Meanwhile various groups are experimenting with new or better kinds of coffee, sugar cane, corn, palm for palm oil, casta beans, the acituna tree which produces natural vegetable oil, disease resistant cacao trees, soy beans, abaca, and other products.

It has proved more difficult to stop erosion and promote soil conservation, but some signs of progress can be seen. Guatemala has undertaken a large scale reforestation program under the leadership of the F.A.O. and a very successful program of locust control has been directed in Honduras by the same specialized agency of the United Nations. In Salvador and in Costa Rica the F.A.O. has been assisting the national governments in their efforts to develop more economic use of their land. Irrigation projects have been instituted and the use of green manures encouraged by the many county agents who serve as agricultural education officers---a type of service introduced by the Institute of Inter-American Affairs several years ago.

Contour farming and irrigation are making headway as two methods of improved farming and the use of hay making machinery has improved harvesting methods, espod ally in Costa Rica.

The Institute of Nutrition for Central America and Panama, in cooperation with F.A.O., W.H.O., and UNICEF, is making surveys of food habits and experimenting with ways of increasing the protein content of food as this is the greatest deficiency in the diet of most persons.



They are also devising means of increasing the iodine content in food in order to prevent endemic goiter, which is very prevalent in parts of Central America.

Some of F.A.O.'s major efforts in this part of the world have been in the prevention of animal diseases, with their efforts largely concentrated in Nicaragua. Attempts to develop better livestock have ranged from the formation of clubs similar to the 4 H clubs in the United States to work on demonstration farms in the breeding of cattle, horses, pigs, and other livestock.

In these and scores of other ways attempts are being made to increase and improve the food supply of these Central American republics.

#### IV

Power for houses and factories is one of the many essentials of modern nations, but unfortunately Central America lacks coal, oil, and gas. However, she does have a few rivers which are suitable for producing electricity for use in homes and factories.

The most important single power project at the moment in Central America is the harnessing of the Lempe River in El Salvador, the largest river in the isthmus. This is being done with the aid of the International Bank of Reconstruction and Finance and is the culmination of a dream of many years. Sometimes it is referred to as the T.V.A. of Central America, for it may well transform the central part of El Salvador. It will supply electrical power, provide water for irrigation, and probably lead to a wider diversification of industry than is now possible.

In Costa Rica a similar project is underway to dam the Rio Grande at La Garita, west of San Jose. Plans are underway for a second and similar hydro-electrical plant at the Reventazon, east of the capital.

In Nicaragua an extensive survey of industrial possibilities has just been completed by the International Bank. Their plans call for an increase of 25% in the volume of agricultural and industrial production in five years.



In order to implement these plans a National Economic Council and a National Development Institute have been organized and it looks as if the plan would soon be underway.

One of the gratifying results of the work of the Children's Fund in Central America has been the impetus it has given to the establishment of dried milk plants. Already Nicaragua has started construction of such a plant and plans are being drafted for the building of similar plants in each of the Central American nations.

Gradually small new industries are appearing in this territory. In Costa Rica factories have been started for making matches, glassware, industrial yeast, shoes, sugar refining, and for canning tuna fish and pineapples. In El Salvador two cement plants and a shoe factory ~~xxxx~~ turning out 1000 pairs of shoes a day have been opened recently. These are evidence of industrial progress in supplying some of the basic needs of the people of Central America.

## V

Basic to a better life is a better education for all the people of Central America. Illiteracy is still very high in this part of the world. Recent figures are difficult to obtain and often unreliable, but the estimates indicate only 30 to 35% literacy in most of these countries, with about 20% in Guatemala and 75 to 80% in Costa Rica.

No major campaigns are underway which compare with the ones in Mexico or Turkey a few years ago, but slow progress can be reported. Guatemala has just announced new plans for combatting illiteracy but with methods which are of dubious merit according to some experts. More promising is its system of rural nuclear schools, with 20 pilot or demonstration institutions and approximately 20 other schools grouped around each of these. In these institutions there is considerable emphasis upon school gardens, caring for animals as well as upon activity methods or learning by doing.



Started some years ago under the impetus of the Institute of Inter-American Cooperation, they are still the outstanding feature of Guatemalan education.

Sensing the need for more vocational training, several nations are making efforts to improve industrial and pre-vocational education. Plans for a new school have been drafted by an American under the Point 4 program in Salvador. A Swiss educator, working under the direction of UNESCO, is doing a similar job in Costa Rica. And in Honduras a vocational agricultural school has been started at Catacamas, paid for by the Honduras government, but promoted by the Institute of Inter-American Cooperation under the Point 4 program.

Teacher education has also claimed the attention of these Central American countries. Quite wisely they have begun to develop rural training centers to encourage young men and women to teach in the outlying areas and to obtain their training in such neighborhoods. In Honduras such a rural establishment has been created for boys and girls. In Costa Rica the UNESCO mission is working with teachers and in Guatemala an old school has been renovated and reconstructed as the chief center for training teachers who will work with the Indians.

Several of the U.N. agencies have combined to work in a Demonstration Project in Salvador whose chief goal is health education, but whose ancillary goals include teacher education and work with adults under the direction of another UNESCO expert.

The two chief agricultural schools in this whole area are the Pan-American School of Agriculture in Honduras, sponsored by the United Fruit Company and the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences in Costa Rica, opened in 1944 and affiliated with the Organization of American States.

These examples of evolutionary changes illustrated the social, economic, and educational revolution which is now occurring in these five neighboring nations of Central America. Each of these examples means little by itself, but taken as a whole they auger well for the improvement of life in this