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Title:

“Si no tengo tierra, Como voy a morir?” (If I don’t have land, how am I going to die?): Land and Food Insecurity in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala.

Abstract:

The role of agricultural land is critical to life in rural Guatemala. It serves as a source of income and sustenance as well as an immense pressure and responsibility. Maize, beans, and the land from which they are harvested, are common factors in a web of extensive relationships that link table tortillas with U.S. migration from Guatemala and international industries such as palm oil and beef production. Many rural families in the region must struggle at every point of agricultural production from procuring land to the sale and consumption of harvests. With very few alternatives when faced with hardship or disaster, people often must take on loans against land in the hopes of finding a solution, whether it is an illness, a scam, debt, robbery, flood, or corporate land grabs. This forces families into cycles of increasing instability, all of which would be improved with better consistency in the production, consumption, and sale of corn, beans, and other produce grown in the region. Using over a year of participant observation, applied anthropological development work with over 30 communities, and over a decade’s worth of archaeological labor with community members from the region, this study explores the various outcomes and responses to land precarity. This research found that families often develop partial solutions that are not selling land, loans, or wage labor, but rather involve diversifying crops, reorganizing land, and almost always the sale of prepared food, snacks, and food related services. Despite being at the center of many issues in the region, land, and the food that it produces, gives opportunity for economic life, is an integral component of cultural identity, and operates as a vehicle for agency in rural Guatemala.