



# The Effect of State–Local Complementarity and Local Governance on Development: A Comparative Analysis from Post-War Guatemala

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**Summary.** — What accounts for variation in human development levels across similar communities? Why, for example, have some equally poor, indigenous, highland communities in Guatemala made advances in health and education while others have stagnated or regressed? This paper argues that, contrary to an emerging recognition of the role of “ordinary citizens” in peacebuilding or crime reduction, human development requires the complementarity of non-state leaders and government resources. Results are demonstrated through a quantitative analysis of all of Guatemala’s 334 municipalities, combined with a qualitative analysis, including over 250 key informant interviews and focus group participants from four paired communities throughout the Western Highlands, which effectively traces the implementation of a widely acclaimed government anti-hunger program. This paper underscores the variability in local governance present across short distances in Guatemala, with dramatic influence on local development outcomes. In most communities, the role of traditional leaders and other non-state actors is increasingly crowded out by political conflicts exacerbated by growing, and shifting political party and religious affiliations. In these instances, development governance has broken down and development resources are distributed along locally derived lines of patronage *versus* need. Elsewhere, however, where state actors have identified and incorporated the legitimacy, informal authority, and networks of traditional leaders at the village level, the implementation of the anti-hunger program is visibly more effective. The role of local, informal leaders is pivotal in legitimizing the program, mobilizing citizen participation, and overseeing more equitable distribution of key resources. The paper concludes with an exploration of what explains variation in the quality of local governance across space and its implications for development practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: SPATIAL VARIATION OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE GUATEMALAN HIGHLANDS

Guatemala’s 36 year long civil war, unfulfilled land reforms, unimplemented peace accords, and now drastically high rates of criminal violence (coupled with continued high rates of impunity) each contribute and intertwine to hinder more equitable development gains nationally. These factors—along with what some call a dysfunctional state apparatus and a structural racism that severely disadvantages the large indigenous population—remain critical to explaining Guatemala’s stalled prosperity.

This paper, however, probes a different and mostly overlooked phenomenon altogether—why communities of otherwise similar historical, geographical, and demographic backgrounds within Guatemala have diverging experiences with, and outcomes from, 20 years of post-war development. Some communities, for example, are doing better in reducing infant mortality (Figure 1), hunger or illiteracy rates, while otherwise very similar communities continue to struggle along the most basic indicators of wellbeing. What accounts for these peculiar differences across communities of similar geography, history, and ethno-linguistic background? What, in other words, explains variation in human development outcomes *within* rural western Guatemala?

In order to answer this puzzle the paper utilizes three overlapping methods, both quantitative and qualitative. The project begins with a regression analysis of all 334 Guatemalan municipalities, exploring the relationship between levels of “state density,” local spending, crime, and other local factors compared with myriad development metrics, including their changes over time. The quantitative component, however, does more to enrich and underscore the puzzle than answer

it. The irrelevance of state presence at the local level for development, for example, is striking, but identifying causal relationships hinges instead on qualitative work in Guatemala. Findings are based on fieldwork which spanned over six months and include the results of key informant interviews and focus groups held in hard-to-access hamlets throughout the targeted municipalities ( $N = 254$ ; 251 individuals, 146 focus group participants, 108 discrete interviews).

A Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) of four Highlands communities—chosen specifically in order to control for factors like climate, access to roads, or regional economic hubs—helps isolate significant explanatory variables, while contextualizing others, like the role of social discord in each community for instance. A process-tracing stage drills more deeply still, and examines how the implementation of an internationally acclaimed government anti-hunger program (*El Pacto Hambre Cero* or the “Zero Hunger Pact) differs across three communities. This component, building on the others, elucidates which local factors distinguish those more “successful” communities from those coping with especially poor development indicators and experiences.

A plausible explanation for discrepancies across similar communities might be that differing levels of state presence yield different degrees of service provision and thus distinct outcomes. In contrast, between government corruption and anemic capacity everywhere, differences in local development

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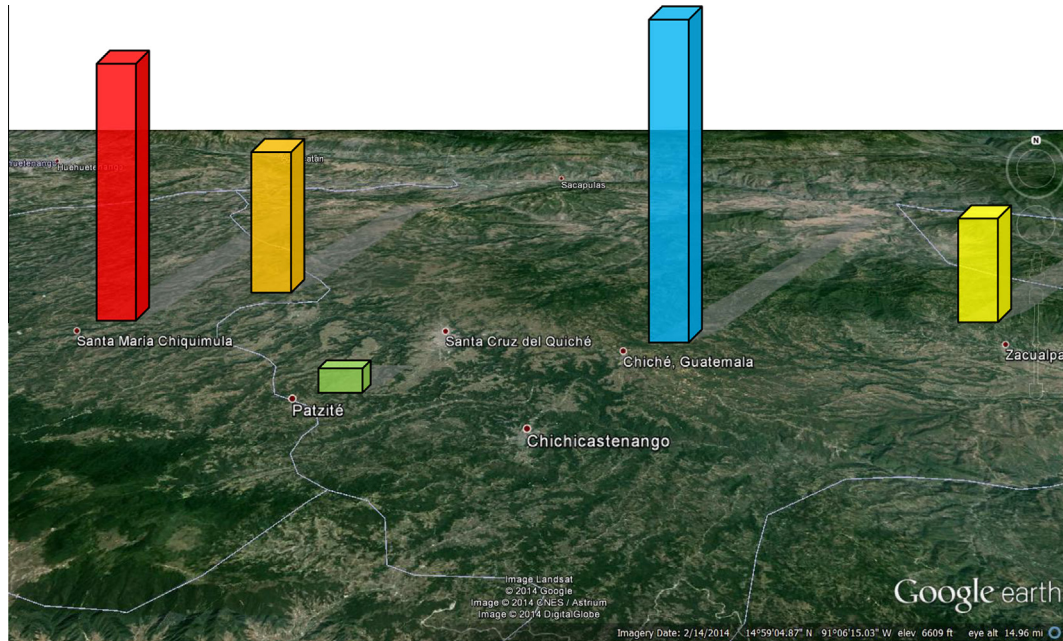


Figure 1. Variation in infant mortality rates (2011) across select Guatemalan highland communities. The communities span a belt across southern Quiché Department and into Totonicapán and are used to illustrate the peculiar discrepancies in development metrics across similarly poor, rural communities.

profiles might instead be the result of either different levels of social cohesion at the local level, or the influence of traditional leadership and intact traditional norms that mobilize citizens or provide additional accountability. Neither, however, explains observed outcomes by themselves.

This paper argues that spatial variation in human development and hunger in the Western highlands of Guatemala is explained most by the degree to which formal delivery and government implementation utilizes, and indeed complements, local forms of legitimate, and influential local leadership, or what is heretofore called state–local complementarity. This is conceived, below, as differences in local *de facto* governance.

#### (a) Significance of spatial variation in local development outcomes

The phenomenon of spatial variation of human development is significant for several reasons. First, Guatemala has received notable external assistance since the 1996 Peace Accords were struck—through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Bank organizations, foreign NGOs and through bi-lateral aid.<sup>1</sup> Despite outside assistance and capacity enhancement programs, however, and despite an alphabet soup of ministries and a revolving door of anti-poverty and development initiatives, variation in outcomes at the community level suggests that poorly-understood local conditions thwart well-intentioned and even comprehensive development programs—thus squandering resources and limiting both scope and impact. This paper explicitly analyzes the implementation of development programming over similar communities, underscoring its complexity, and striving to tease out which local factors explain development disparities.

Second, spatial variation in development outcomes confounds basic assumptions of much development programming—that rural areas, or all indigenous groups, for example, have identical needs and/or identical obstacles to development. Literature increasingly underscores how locally sited

factors, whether the role of social cohesion at the village level (Kaplan, 2013) or deeply-entrenched resistance to outside influence (Pugh, 2005), significantly influence post-war outcomes across space.

Acknowledging the significance of local factors is especially relevant in a country like Guatemala, where the breadth and scope of state presence is notoriously limited, and where more spatially variegated political processes have been well documented. These include the relevance of indigenous forms of governance, legal-pluralism, and competing claims to sovereignty—over life, land, or local authority (Godoy, 2006; Larson, 2008; Sieder, 2011; Stepputat, 2015; Yashar, 1998). But whereas local communities might have leeway in affecting episodes of violence or on crime, in particular, this paper also explores the *limitations* that local actors face when the dependent variable is something as complex as human development.

None of the communities under investigation in this paper experience excellent outcomes in development, nevertheless the variation across similarly poor communities is stark (Table 1). As noted above, this paper argues that a critical factor explaining variation is the degree to which state actors, with important material resources, work with, and even defer to, both official and informal authorities at the community level who mobilize citizens and distribute resources equitably and more transparently. Crucially, this paper finds that development gains are best when informal authorities are expressly incorporated into the implementation of a key development program.

This is a rare occurrence, however, and the toxic combination of state mismanagement, deep distrust of state authorities as well as local political divisions and rivalries routinely thwart what might have been state–local complementarity. Nevertheless, lessons from Guatemala empirically demonstrate how subtle, local political dynamics and shifting state–society relations have a direct bearing on livelihoods in developing countries, with implications for evolving development practice.

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