

GENERAL PROFILE OF BELIZE

GEO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

At 23,000 square kilometers land area, Belize is the second smallest country on the Western Hemisphere mainland. Its terrain varies from low and swampy in the coastal areas to several small mountain ranges, the highest point reaching 1,122 meters. The climate is sub-tropical with temperatures ranging from 16 degrees to 38 degrees centigrade. Rainfall varies considerably from year to year but generally ranges from 125cm in the north to 4500cm in the south.

Administratively the country is divided into six districts: Belize, Cayo, Corozal, Orange Walk, Stann Creek and Toledo.

Forty-six percent of the country's inhabitants live in eight urban centers: the largest being Belize City, the former capital, with 45,000 inhabitants. Belmopan, the inland capital city, was built after Hurricane Hattie destroyed coastal Belize City in 1961. About 12,600 people live in rural communities with fewer than 200 inhabitants.

Belize attained constitutional independence from the United Kingdom in 1981. Its constitution and political system is that of a parliamentary democracy, a variant of the British or 'Westminster' model of constitutional monarchy, with the queen of the British Commonwealth as the titular head of state represented in the country by a Governor General whom the monarch appoints in consultation with the Prime Minister of Belize.

The National assembly is a bicameral legislature with an elected House of Representatives and an appointed Senate. Ministers of Government are appointed from among the members of the House and the Senate. The Cabinet, which consists of the Prime Minister and the Ministers, directs the policy of the Government and is collectively responsible to the National Assembly.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Belize's longest border is shared with Guatemala. As is to be expected, Belize's history over recent decades has been, in large part, framed by the nature of its relationship with Guatemala, which has occasionally challenged Belize's right to self-determination and sovereignty over its lands, resources and people.

Given that much of Guatemala's recent history has itself been one of a government in which the military has frequently played a, if not the, leading role, this has understandably generated an environment within Belize of national threat and potential instability. This has been enforced by occasional border tensions and military buildups over the past couple of decades.

Belize has national, sovereignty, and international recognition of this fact. Nevertheless, the border dispute with Guatemala persists, to Belize's consternation and frustration. This has meant that, at the time of Belize's independence, the outgoing British administration agreed to maintain a defense force in Belize, to support Belize's own small force and to ensure security against any imminent threat. In 1993, the British administration decided to withdraw its defense force, although it will be leaving a training mission. Belize is now responsible for its own defense.

The British troop withdrawal has itself had a sizeable impact upon the Belizean economy and society. As one example, the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry has estimated that the presence of those military personnel had constituted about 9% of Belize's GDP.

During the past couple of decades, the effect of civil conflicts within Guatemala has also meant that a many thousands of displaced and refugee Guatemalans have entered Belize. Whilst such immigrants have arrived from other Central American countries, the largest number has come from Guatemala. This has an enormous impact upon such a small population: its social, cultural, and economic structures, as extensive pressures are placed on Belize's infrastructure, including housing, labour market, health and education services. Some of these implications are discussed in section 4.2.8, especially as they impact upon women.

Clearly, such domestic pressures largest arise simply because Belize has maintained itself as a peaceful and democratic nation. This makes it something of a magnet to people in neighboring countries suffering civil wars, repression, economic hardship, violence, lost of homes and livelihoods, and so forth.

Obviously, Belize has much interest in supporting moves for civil order and democracy in the region, as do those neighboring countries themselves. Whilst Belize has accepted large numbers of refugees and displaced persons, it acknowledges that, under conditions of peace and freedom, those people would normally choose to live in their original homelands. In turn, Belize would itself benefit from improved economic relations with those countries and would be in a stronger position to better care for its own people and develop its domestic economy.

DEMOGRAPHY

Belize has one of the lowest population densities in the world with only 21.9 persons per square mile. The highest density is in the Belize District (that includes Belize City) of 34.4 persons per square mile. According to the 1991 population Census, the total population of Belize was 194,000. The age distribution of the population is that a 'young' nation: 64% of the population is

under 25 years, of age, of whom 44% is under 15 years. However, between 1980 and 1991, the percentage of the population aged under 15 years decreased from 46.2% to 43.9% (2.5 percentage points) and for those sixty five years or older decreased from 4.6% to 4.2%. The under 18 year old population fell from 53.2% of the population in 1980 to 50.6%(2.6 percentage points), which suggests that the largest concentration of youth population decline was in the 16-17 age group. However, when desegregated by place of birth, it is noted that the 2.6% decline comprises a 4.3 percentage point fall in the Belize-born under 18 population, but a 2.0 percentage point growth in the foreign-born under-18 population, (0.3% difference represents the 'not stated/not known' category in 1980.

As already noted, as a result of the political turmoil in Central America, large numbers of refugees have migrated to Belize in the past decade, mainly Guatemalans and Salvadorans. There is no accurate account of the refugees residing in Belize. Official records show that 9000 people have been formally granted refugee status. However it is not known how many immigrants have remained resident without applying for refugee status: either seeking citizenship status following the requisite period of residency, or simply remaining in Belize without the proper registration. There are also no accurate estimates of the numbers of erstwhile refugees in Belize who subsequently return to their homelands after a period. Unofficial estimates of Belize's refugee population range from between 15,000 and 40,000. Even at UNHCR's best estimate of 29,000, this represents about 14% of the total population a level surely unequalled in any other country.

A high natural growth rate, estimated at 2.6% per annum, and immigration from neighboring republics, is offset by the continual flow of Belizean emigrants to North America. Statistics suggest that as many as one out of eight Belizean residents emigrated during the past ten years. One estimate is that there are approximately 90,000 Belizeans living in the United States of America, roughly one half of the actual population living in Belize.

Creoles constitute 30% of the population: down from 40% in 1980. They reside predominantly (67%) in Belize City and the rural areas of Belize District. Spanish speaking Mestizos, descendants of Amerindians and Europeans, account for 44% of the total (up from 33% in 1980) and reside primarily in the three districts bordering Mexico and Guatemala. The Garinagu, descendants of the Carib Indians from the eastern Caribbean and African slaves, make up 7% of the population and reside predominantly in the Stann Creek and the coastal areas of the Toledo District.

Mayan Indian groups constitute 11% of the population. The two major Mayan groups are the Mopan and Ketchi who live primarily in the district of Toledo. German-speaking Mennonites account for 3% of the population. Other small groups in the country include East Indians, Chinese and Lebanese.

An examination of data birthplace shows that, for both 1980 and 1991, the indigenous adult (18 years and over) female population exceeded that of

males, but the immigrant/foreign born population exceeded that of females. The net effect is that the number of adult males exceeded the number of adult females in both 1980 and 1991: a consequence of migration patterns.

Belize faces unusual demographic situation: rapid growth, despite net emigration with continued low population density. Migration patterns mean continued pressures on fertility rates and practices, a growing rural population, changing ethnic population ratios, and an increased adult male: female ratio.

THE BELIZE NATIONAL POPULATION REPORT

The 1993 Belize National Population Report was prepared by the CSO and makes a number of important observations with respect to women. It notes that, although there has been a declining dependency rate over the eighties, from 47% to 44%, this is only a small improvement. As such, it continues to represent a significant burden on the domestic roles of women on Belize, as well as seriously inhibiting their fuller socio-economic integration and economic independence.

The report notes that Belize's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is still "significantly higher than replacement level". Of course, Belize also has a very low population density, so that immigration patterns have had a very marked effect on the changing population profile. The report states that " the TFR for the foreign born women, entering the country after 1980 is 5.67, compared to 4.42 for the native born women.

Statistics on adolescent fertility are understood to be distorted (understated), given a lack of data on illegal abortions, among other reasons. Nevertheless, it concludes that the teenage pregnancy rate approximately 20 percent are one of the highest in the Caribbean and indeed in Latin America. Furthermore, most pregnant teenage girls drop out of school and are able to finish their education. It is of great concern that, with the exception of only one private school, pregnant girls have been prohibited from returning to secondary education. This situation is slowly changing, but remains a discretionary practice.

The report notes difficulty in projecting population trends in the absence of a national population policy which includes target TFRs, incorporating attention to adolescent fertility, birth control and family planning, and ethnic fertility patterns associated with Belize's unique migration and refugee situation.

The National Population Report concludes with a plea that GOB develop, adopt and implement a national population policy which is cognizant of both current realities and of the necessity to pursue clear targets, strategies and goals. Primary characteristics must include Belize's young population (over 40% below the age of 15 years), migration trends, high fertility levels, and declining mortality rates.

ECONOMIC SITUATION

In comparison to its neighboring Central American countries, Belize's economy is relatively stable. From 1964, when it obtained self-governing status, until 1981, GDP grew at an average of 5% annually. A drastic drop in sugar prices and other adverse economic factors resulted in a negative growth rate in 1982; but by 1984 the economy recovered with a growth in the GDP of 4.5%. Real GDP grew at a rate of 9.0% between 1986 and 1991. Over 1991 and 1992, real GDP growth averaged at the rate of 6.8% while inflation averaged 4%. GDP growth of 4.2% is estimated for 1993.

Official figures suggest an average growth rate in per capita GNP of 6.4% annum between 1980 and 1989. Annual per capita income in 1989 was officially computed at US \$1,598 and, for 1993, it was estimated to be US \$2,555 (GDP at market price).

The country's main exports are sugar, citrus, bananas, fish products, timber and garments. In recent years, there has been significant growth in the construction and tourism industries.

The Belize dollar is pegged to the US dollar at the rate of BZE \$2.00 to US \$1.00. Unless otherwise stated, all financial data in this publication are expressed in the expressed construction and tourism industries.

IN the last fiscal year, 32.2% of government's recurrent and capital budget was allocated to the social sector. This represents \$120.7M and includes expenditures for health, education, community development and social services. For 1994/95, an amount of \$150.1M has been allowed, or allocated or 35.8% of Government expenditure.

Social services expenditures have accounted for between 25% and 30% of Government's recurrent cost budget over the past decade.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Plan stated that its "approach to women in development will no longer focus exclusively on efficiency, but be broadened to include support for their valuable threefold roles as producers, reproducers and community managers.

Even so, that Plan still suffered from several deficiencies.

Women received no specific attention within strategies for the productive sector (agriculture, fisheries, natural resources, tourism and the environment, and trade and commerce), the infrastructure sector (energy and communications and transport and public works), or the government administration sector (home affairs and defense, public service and labour, and foreign affairs/refugees; with the one exception of examining equal opportunities International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions.

-Arguably the most critical sectors to ensuring women's equitable participation in national economic and labour force opportunities.

-The ambitious undertakings about employment and training, and labour market gender bias, were not included in the 7-point strategy and appear to have been both unresourced and unspecified as clear actions

-Resourcing and implementation of many of the Plan's most important promises seem to have not been acted upon

-The Plan did not address reform of the most important structural impediment to gender equality; namely the need to overhaul entrenched patriarchal power frameworks

- Such that women were still largely treated as the passive recipients of assistance which, however well-intentioned, continue to leave in place the gender relations which ensure that inequality persists.

The new administration's Plan is presently being formulated for the period 1994-98.

SOCIAL SITUATION

Belizean society has historically evolved from a multi-ethnic background. Each successive wave of immigrants has contributed to the development of a racially heterogeneous population, in which each ethnic group maintains some level of cultural identity and a recognizable core territory.

Although a diversity of languages is spoken, English is the official language and 77% speak it, but barely half the population speak it very well. More than half of the population is fluent in Spanish (44% very well). In addition, Mopan Mayan, Ketchi, Garifuna and German are spoken in regional clusters.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Reports have put Belize's level of adult literacy at 93% (1985), 85%(1990) and 96%(1992): these are not official Government of Belize data. The CSO has committed the functional literacy rate about 70%. Pressures on that rate arise from the influx of refugees, high attrition rates within the schools and a number of other factors.

Education is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 14 years. In 1992-93, there were 269 primary schools in the country, 241 of which were government-managed or aided schools. Barely 13% of primary schools are government managed. Government pays 100% of the teacher's salaries and 70% of maintenance costs and capital outlay of church-manage and government-aided schools.

There are a total of 31 secondary schools: 10 government managed, 16 church or community based, and 5 recognized private schools. At this level, Government aided schools receive 70% of the teacher's salaries and 50% of maintenance costs and capital outlays. Since 1993, tuition at secondary school level is provided by the Government, and is being extended to the first year of sixth form level.

Government education policy increasingly emphasizes further education opportunities for women. Consistent with international experience, this is recognized as an essential part of improving national development levels and enabling the necessary social and economic development of Belize.

The 1991 Census showed that women headed an estimated 22% of Belizean households. In contrast, a 1990 UNICEF study puts the level of female-headed households at 25% in 1970, and rising to 28% in 1998. The comparability between these data and evidently conflicting trends – is known. The majority of children are born out of wedlock (59%) in 1990). This does not necessarily mean being born into an unstable union. Common law marriages are prevalent as are the visiting relationships found in other parts of the Caribbean. About 20% of all live births are to mothers aged under 20 years old.

TRADE UNIONS

Structure

Trade Unions are generally organized by trades and/or occupation. The nine (9) unions in Belize represent Teachers, Sugar cane workers, Banana workers, Waterfront and Statutory Boards, Telephone workers, Electricity workers, Water and Sewage Authority workers, Public Officers, and Permanent Secretaries and Head of Departments.

Each Union is affiliated to the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) and each have the basic structure of President, Vice Presidents, General Secretaries, Treasurers and councillors or committee members. All officers are elected.

The Labour department, headed by a commissioner, which administers (outdated) labour legislation is the secretariat for the Labour Advisory Board. This board is the tri-partite construct of Belize.

Training

Each affiliate Union in Belize conduct their own training programmes through local and international funding sources. All general training initiatives of the TUC has until recently been a resultant of international funding. This year the government of Belize has for the first time allocated funds through the labour department for training at the Rank and File level in particular. The TUC Education committee is in the process of finalizing its training strategy and the rudiments of the logframes matrix is being developed. The issue of ILO Standards do not enjoy priority status at this time.

Freedom of Association

Freedom of Association is enshrined in the constitution of Belize. The plight of the Banana workers (mostly migrant) has received major attention in recent

times. These workers have been exploited and strong opposition to trade union organization exist. In fact the Solidaridad Movement has been introduced to impede the entry of legitimate Trade Unions. The New Government has rescinded the Essential Services Legislation that had seriously affected the activities of the Public Services Union. The Electricity Workers benefited from a landmark judgement of the Belize Supreme Court that upheld the union position regarding the legality of their collective agreement which the Company asserted had expired.

OSH Working Conditions etc.

Working Conditions are negotiated individually and with the moral and sometimes technical support of the TUC. There is a Workers Health Plan that had been developed in conjunction with the National Health Plan. The New Government is currently revisiting these plans. The Government has since June ratified conventions 14, 100, 111, 135, 140, 141, 151, 154, 155, and 156.

Promotion of ILS

A lack of education appears to be the principal impediment to the promotion of the ILS. The perception of these being not as important as other day to day problems need to be dispelled. Perhaps the link between the virtual survival of the union movement and the cor standards needs to be emphasized.

Information Technology

Desk top Publishing of newsletters invitation production of News releases etc. are common use of computers Most affiliates have and use computers. Most have E-mail and use the internet to obtain information. Some affiliates are developing databases to enhance the services to members.