Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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Black Beans: Rich in Protein and Potential for Mayan Families

Dorotia Vieira, Peace Corps

Mayan mothers enjoying a MASFRIJOL nutrition session about which foods will help their babies avoid becoming stunted and malnourished.

Colorful clusters of buildings dot the steep, dramatic peaks of Quiché in Guatemala's Western Highlands. While these small, indigenous Mayan communities sit at the top of the world, their children are held down by a vicious cycle of chronic undernutrition. A full 70 percent of children under 2 do not get the amount of protein they need for healthy brain development. This deficiency has long-term consequences, including stunting children's growth and affecting their ability to study and to grow into productive adults who will help strengthen Guatemala's struggling economy.

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Collaborative Research on Grain Legumes, led by Michigan State University, is helping reduce chronic undernutrition in Quiché by bringing education and training opportunities to the doorsteps of remote Mayan families through the USAID MASFRIJOL project. The project provides education and training in agriculture and nutrition and promotes the production and consumption of black beans. Rich in protein, these beans can add much-needed nutrients to the diets of rural Mayan families if consumed in greater quantities, but unfortunately, many are unaware of their nutritional value.

To improve knowledge about black beans, the agricultural practices used to grow them, and ways to prepare them, project technicians are always on the move. Mobilizing the expertise of the Legume Innovation Lab, they travel great lengths in four-wheel-drive vans, equipped to be multifunctional training units. Their aim is to reach 25,000 food insecure households by September 2017. The project not only encourages increased consumption of black beans, but also distributes protein-fortified varieties that are adapted to local climatic conditions. Project experts also provide technical training for improved practices for cultivating these varieties, and have initiated community seed banks that farmers contribute to in order to maintain supply in the target areas.

On any particular sunny day, one can find Nutrition Education Specialist and Peace Corps Response Volunteer Dorotia Vieira

carrying her overstuffed backpack full of cooking utensils and ingredients into remote Mayan communities. Vieira, a Fulbright Scholar alumnus whose passions are education and food security, facilitates sessions with groups of 10-20 women. In these sessions, which usually run 2 hours, she demonstrates how to prepare protein-packed recipes. The women also learn how to identify the early symptoms of malnutrition and child stunting and how to remedy them. Over the course of a few months, they receive five nutrition lessons that include six recipe demonstrations.

Vieira, like all of the project's staff, encourages active participation from her group members and uses culturally sensitive materials that have been translated into the local Mayan language to foster a deeper understanding of the information being taught.

Doña Sebastiana, a participant in these nutrition and recipe sessions, explained how the education and training has helped her to understand the gravity of chronic malnutrition in her own community. "The problem is that a lot of us don't know there's a problem with how our children are growing," she said. "We don't understand that maybe they're getting sick from not eating enough protein. We don't understand that what they eat now will affect their future." Feeling empowered by what she's learned, Doña Sebastiana plans on sharing her new understanding of childhood stunting and chronic malnutrition (along with some new recipes) with her friends and family in hopes of securing a better future for the generations to come.