

## Sustainable Trade in the Ixil Triangle, Guatemalan Highlands

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### Abstract

Guatemala has among the largest numbers of indigenous people living within its borders in Central America. With wealth coming from tourism and exports concentrated mainly around Guatemala City, descendants of the ancient Maya live in small, ethnically distinct villages where locals struggle to preserve their heritage. Isolated in the valleys between the Cuchumatanes Mountains, the Ixil Triangle is home to a unique community of Ixil people who have retained their ancient way of life. Men tend to be farmers, women weave using technologies passed down from generation to generation, and few have a strong grasp of Spanish as a second language. Yet despite the isolation, tensions and instability in modern-day Guatemala have struck this community hard.

A startling number of the indigenous citizens of Guatemala, who make up 40% of the population, have no access to education, and many have no voice in the political process, as they lack the financial means to pay to become registered citizens. The Ixil also face economic pressures, as well as the repercussions of a bloody civil war that ended in 1996, taking an entire generation of men as casualties.

Faced with the prospect of their disappearing culture, a small group of widows in the village of San Juan Cotzal have welcomed the help of European volunteers, and formed a weaving co-op. They take orders from distributors in more established tourist stops like Guatemala City and Antigua, utilizing age-old technologies to make carpets, bags, shawls, and other products that volunteers then deliver to stores around the country. Building upon the business skills they gain by maintaining the co-op, the widows are both politically and economically active, taking initiative on behalf of their community. Future projects include organizing fundraisers to equip each widow's home with proper stoves and developing an improved outreach strategy to goods distributors in the larger cities. Defying heavy odds, the empowered women of Ixil are finding local ways to integrate their heritage into the global landscape.

**Keywords:** trade, Guatemala, Maya heritage, co-op, women empowerment



Figure 1: Two traditionally clad Ixil women walk down the street, passing the main church in Santa Maria Nebaj, the largest municipality in the Ixil Triangle. As many men of all ages were killed during the Civil War, one is very likely to encounter a disproportionate number of women walking down the streets of Nebaj. Taken in May 2010.



Figure 2: A woman in the marketplace looks on as passers-by browse goods for sale in Santa Maria Nebaj. May 2010.



Figure 3: Local Ixil trade their goods in the marketplace in San Juan Cotzal. Women are wearing traditional Maya blouses and skirts, while men tend to wear more modern clothes often imported from the United States. May 2010.





Figure 4: A young girl walks down an alley in San Juan Cotzal. May 2010.



Figure 5: Doña Teresa demonstrates an age old rug weaving technique that she has learned from her mother. After marrying and divorcing an abusive first husband, her second was killed during the Guatemalan Civil War. She has made a living traveling like many other Ixil women to work on the coffee plantations near the coast, but the harsh conditions affected her health and she was forced to return to San Juan Cotzal. Now she is part of Tejidos Cotzal, a cooperative that aims to commercialize the

hand-woven products and raise money for a number of local projects that could improve the lives of the 30 or so women who have joined the co-op. Doña Teresa does not know her real age. May 2010.



Figure 6: Doña Catrina prepares coffee beans for roasting. She welcomes tourists to her home as part of the eco-tours Tejidos Cotzal offers, always enjoying an opportunity to practice her Spanish.



Figure 7: The kitchen in Doña Catrina's home. Many of the women live and cook in houses that do not benefit from proper stoves, developing conditions of the respiratory system because of the smoke they inhale. One of the biggest priorities of women that have joined the co-op is to raise funds for equipping every widow's home with an eco-friendly stove. May 2010.





Figure 8: Pedro is one of the local volunteers with Tejidos Cotzal. He studied in university in order to improve his English, and would like to continue to work in the local tourism industry. Pedro coordinates the eco-tours with the widows via indispensable cell phones that many of the women carry. May 2010.



Figure 9: Doña Catrina sipping a cup of coffee prepared according to an ancient Maya recipe. May 2010.





Figure 10: Typical Maya altar in the house of Doña Petronila, the founder of Tejidos Cotzal. Religious habits of the Ixil have been heavily influenced by the Catholic faith. At the top are pictures of Doña Petronila's husband and brother, both of whom perished during the Guatemalan Civil War. May 2010.



Figure 11: Doña Petronila, the founder of the weaving coop Tejidos Cotzal, stands for a portrait outside of her house. Although she lost much of her family during the war, she adopted a girl named Juana after finding her lost and crying in the woods. May 2010.



Figure 12: Doña Juana, the adoptive daughter of coop founder Doña Petronila, makes wax candles based on an ancient Maya technique. She sells the candles in church or at the market, for people to use at altars in their homes. May 2010.





Figure 13: An Ixil family whose income depends on the revenue from hand-woven products sold through Tejidos Cotzal stands outside their home for a portrait. A handmade carpet can take up to a few months to complete, and as they design new products, the widows incorporate symbols and motifs pertaining to their traditional culture. May 2010.