

# CONCLUSION

## UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

It would be easy to look at the data presented in the maquila, crafts and coffee sections of the report and simply state that the wages/income in these sectors do not meet the standard of the sustainable living wage/income. It would also be easy to simply calculate the percentages of the SLW/I that the present income levels provide for the workers. However those simple calculations, presented following this paragraph, are just the beginning of our understanding of the role that wages and income play in the lives of the workers, their families and communities.

However understanding what the data tells us is more complicated.

*A comparison of the actual monthly income of workers in the three sectors with the purchasing power needed to achieve a Sustainable Living Wage/Income.*

	Maquila workers	Artisans	Coffee Farmers
Monthly Income	Q. 1440.10	Q. 1440.10	Q. 1266.03
Sustainable Living Wage/Income	Q. 5738.71	Q. 3528.74	Q. 4686.87
Percentage of SLW achieved by Monthly Income	25%	41%	27%

To understand the effects of the wage/income levels possible for the workers, we will use three of the constructs from Systemic Analysis to analyze the data and concretely understand the effects of the inadequate wages here in Guatemala. By extension, then we can use the Guatemala income levels as a lens to discuss the role that inadequate income plays in the lives of people anywhere in the world.

Systemic Analysis is a program created by CREA to enable persons and groups to analyze not only the data available but also the effects of the data locally and globally as well as in the short term and long term.

Systemic Analysis uses constructs, or sets of words or terms, to provide both common language and a format for analysis and understanding of a situation, a process or a set of data. Each construct has been designed to focus on different aspects of an issue and to move the discussion from the specific situation to applications to other issues or situations. (For more information on the Systemic Analysis program, please contact CREA.)

The three Systemic Analysis constructs we will use to apply the data from the project are the following:

Construct 1: Legal, Ethical, Moral, Just

Construct 2: Acceptable, Access-able, Afford-able

Construct 3: Charity, Advocacy, Systemic Change

## CONSTRUCT 1: LEGAL, ETHICAL, MORAL, JUST

Every society has standards that it sets for itself as a society and for members of that society. There are four forms of standards that we experience daily in many aspects of our lives whether we are aware of these standards operating or not. These standards are: legal, ethical, moral and just.

Every day we hear these words being used to define and describe all types of standards as they are applied to many aspects of society. If we are honest, and pay attention to what is being written and what is being said in so many places, we have to admit that each of these words can be used and misused as means of convincing others of what is right and wrong. The underlying question is: how are standards created and who does the creating and applying of these standards?

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### Defining the Concept “Legal”

Depending where one lives in the world, there are different ways in which something becomes legal. In some people’s understanding, calling something legal is the same thing as saying that something is law. However this is not always the case.

Certain standards or concepts become law when the governing body of a particular community or society decides that it is law. Laws can be passed at the local or national level. For example, in the US, this can be done through legislative process as when the Congress of the US passes a law and it is signed by the president. In other societies whether or not there are elected representatives, laws can be put into effect by the government entities, whoever they might be. In addition, there are at the international level some “Agreements” (for example, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) or decisions (for example, the United Nations Security Council decisions) that can be enforced by monetary sanctions or even by the use of force. These are similar to laws in that they can be enforced to ensure compliance with agreed-upon standards of behavior.

*An action or arrangement becomes “legal” in varying ways: by governing entities, through business contracts, through international agreements that can be enforced by monetary sanctions or by force, such as United Nations Security Decisions, or the World Trade Organization policies and “disciplines” or regulations.*

However, there are other means by which standards become legal, the most common being contractual relationships. Whether written or oral, contractual relationships are legally binding on all parties who enter into the contract. Contracts exist in many facets of our societies. Some are simple and commonplace. When we use a credit card, there is an implicit contract between you, the person or place from which you are making your purchase and the credit card company. The contract does not need to be explicit each time a purchase is made.

*It is important to explore what happens when the parties entering into a contract or agreement have differing amounts of power.  
Cui Bono? Who then benefits?*

Business relationships are built upon contracts. Contracts govern the purchase and sale of goods and/or services in all parts of the world. The ability to participate in the globalized economy is based upon legally binding contractual relationships.

The ability to enter into contractual relationship is often based upon the power of the parties entering into the contract. This power may be the result of money, other forms of power, or past relationship. Therefore it is important to explore what happens when the parties entering into a contract have differing amounts of power.

# CONCLUSION

In most countries, a legal standard sets the minimum wage for the country.

This brings us to several core questions:

- ◆ What does the word “minimum” mean?
- ◆ Is it a standard for a base or a standard for a limit?
- ◆ What should be the method for determining the minimum wage in a specific country?
- ◆ What should a minimum wage provide for workers?
- ◆ What is the relationship between the legal minimum wage in a country and the poverty line in that country?

How we choose to answer those questions will affect how we are willing to understand the data in this project.

Even though a country will have a legal minimum wage, there are often states or cities that have different minimum wages. In addition, some countries, as we have seen in Guatemala, define the legal minimum wage according to the work done by the worker.

Worker organizations are known by many names. For executives and professional workers there are often professional organizations that provide an “understanding” as to what would be acceptable wages and benefits. For hourly workers, the options are different. Yes, it is true that workers can hope to have wages increased as a result of working well. However the competitive nature of the global economy as well as pressure from the investment markets means that companies, as employers, are continually pressed to provide products and services for the least amount possible. This affects the ability of workers to receive higher wages, wages that will allow them to provide a decent standard of living for themselves and their families

## Defining the Concept “Ethical”

The word “ethical” is also used in a variety of interpretations. Most dictionaries define “ethics” as the “standard of a group”. This standard might be the standard of an entire society, a particular organization or a particular profession. The important thing is to remember that it is the standard of that group...and that all groups have the right to establish that standard for themselves.

Common standards or sets of ethics include medical ethics, professional ethics (varying with different professions), legal ethics, situation ethics, etc. Each of these terms communicates the set of behavior expected by members of the profession or group for themselves... and the standards they communicate to those outside the group.

Therefore how we define a wage standard has to do with whom we identify. Or we could ask: do we see workers as the same as we see ourselves?

*What is the standard used in judging that a particular wage is the minimum allowed?*

*The competitive nature of the global economy, as well as pressure from the investment markets, means that employers are continually pressed to provide products and services for the least possible cost.*

*This, in turn, affects the ability of workers to receive higher wages.*

*Cui Bono? Who benefits from this system?*

*Whether a particular action or arrangement is “ethical” depends on the common set of standards set within the group that defines the term.*

*Do we see workers within “our” group?*

## Defining the Concept “Moral”

As we begin to explore how something becomes a moral standard for a person, a group, a community or society, we need to remember that we come from many different backgrounds. Each background has been defined and lived, and continues to define and live, a standard for themselves. Respect and openness are key if we are to be able to hear each other.

In exploring the concept of moral standard, it takes time and effort to find a topic that is not laden with use and misuse in the media. The terms “moral”, “morality” and “immorality” are frequently used without citing the reference or source for the standard being described. The terms are used as if they never change or as if they are the same in all parts of the world.

The concept of morality asks us to look at how or what we want the standards of a community or society to be in its deepest, most intimate and vital relationships. These are the standards that apply to relationships, those that affect life and death, health and illness, shelter, relationships, responsibilities toward children and vulnerable adults and elders, responsibilities for environmental health, access to the planet’s resources, etc. As members of those communities or societies, these are the moral questions that we ask ourselves.

Closely connected with the concept of “moral” is the concept of human rights. After World War II, and the years of the Holocaust, many nations of the world came together in an attempt to deal with the destructive potential in human interactions, and to establish what they called “Universal Human Rights.” This was the first attempt on a global scale to articulate universal standards of human rights, and to begin to explore ways of implementing these standards. To this date, societies are still struggling with how these universal human rights standards are accepted or not accepted in various countries.

## Defining the Concept “Just”

The concept of “just” is founded on the basic equality of all human beings, not as a generality but also the specificity of each person. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a moral standard, the principles behind each Article within the Declaration define a just society for each and all human beings, wherever they live and work.

Core question: When we are deciding which standard we are applying in a specific situation, we need to ask ourselves: For whom are we willing to apply this standard?” Another way to decide this is to ask which standards we would want used when talking about those whom we love the most: our children, our partners, our parents, etc.

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*After the Holocaust and World War II, the world’s leaders came together to try to deal with the destructive potential in human interactions. This was the first attempt on a global scale to articulate universal standards of human rights.*

*The concept “just” is founded on the basic equality of all human persons.*

*For whom are we willing to apply these standards?*

# CONCLUSION

## CONSTRUCT 2: ACCEPTABLE, ACCESS-ABLE, AFFORDABLE

*Whether or not something is “acceptable” depends on the standards used and the individual or groups for which it is applied.*

### Defining “Acceptable”

The core questions to understand the concept of acceptable are as follows:

1. According to what standards do you decide that something is acceptable?
2. To whom or for whom does something need to apply for it to be acceptable?

How we define acceptable is directly linked to the question of for whom something should to be acceptable. An acceptable standard of purchasing power must be based on the wages and/or income someone is able to earn within the normal work week. Definitions of “acceptable” immediately challenge us to apply the standard universally, for everyone...for without doing that we are denying the basic respect for each and all persons to which we are called by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Some might think that the term “acceptable” means minimal. However as soon as we apply the standard in terms of those for whom we care, that application gets turned on its head.

### Defining “Access-able”

The defined components of a sustainable living wage/income need to be access-able by workers in every sector. This means that there is sufficient money for purchase of the required items, sufficient time to access them wherever they are sold, sufficient transportation or money for transportation, etc.

Access-able can be examined in terms of financial access, distance access, time access, etc. When we consider the places where people work, and the amount of time that needs to be spent at work because of the wage levels, it is easy to see that access-ability is clearly more than the question of whether you can find it or is it available.

The complex question of access-ability of potable water is a clear example of the complexity of access-ability. How far someone must go to get water affects the access-ability of education, for example. Gathering water is usually the work of women and girl children. If extensive time must be spent getting sufficient water for the family, this can affect the ability of girls to attend school.

### Defining “Affordability”

As with access-ability, affordability has more than one aspect. Can something be afforded in terms of money, in terms of time needed to access the item, in terms of the time needed to earn enough to purchase something? Are there items which someone cannot afford to be without because of the effects that will have on the person or a member of one’s family?

The construct of “Acceptable, Access-able, Affordable” invites us to look at how we use data, how we use numbers to describe the realities that they are meant to quantify. Which brings us to Construct 3: Charity, Advocacy, Systemic Change.

*Access-able can be examined in terms of financial access, distance access, time access, etc.*

*Access-ability of potable water has many ramifications in the lives of the persons affected by it.*

*Something be “affordable” or not affordable in terms of money, in terms of time needed to access the item, in terms of the effects on someone if it must be done without.*

## CONSTRUCT 3: CHARITY, ADVOCACY, SYSTEMIC CHANGE

When we are confronted with situations, with the realities in which persons live and work, there is a spectrum of responses possible. For some, that confrontation leads them to turn away and pretend that the situation, the reality, does not exist. Learning to see, learning to be willing to see is an acquired willingness, an acquired skill. But once a person has that willingness and develops that skill, there are three basic categories into which responses can be divided: acts of charity, acts of advocacy, and/or work for system change.

### Response A: Charity

Every day, the media is filled with stories about people and communities who are the victims of violence, environmental disaster, and other crises. Often, the immediate response is the desire to “do something”, to respond to the immediate need. The kind of response is what we call “charity” – the giving of something to meet that immediate need.

*Charity is the response to provide for immediate critical needs. It is truly good and essential.*

From the time we are young, we are taught that charity is good, and it truly is. There are some situations when charity, the giving of something, solves the problem of the recipient. However, when the problem or situation continues to happen, different responses are necessary. If we investigate the causes of a situation, we are often able to see beyond the requirements of that immediate response. The next step is to understand what changes are necessary to prevent the re-occurrence of the problem. Charity is a response; it is not a long term solution.

*In addition to the immediate response, we must investigate the causes of the situation resulting in the immediate critical need. Then we must try to understand what changes are necessary to prevent its recurrence.*

### Response B: from Charity to Advocacy

There is a saying: Give a person a fish; you feed the person for a day.

Teach a person to fish; you feed him/her for a lifetime.

And today we would have to add:

Before you fish, check to see if the person has a fishing rod and bait and if a fishing license is necessary

Check to see if the right to fish has been sold to fish marketers

Check to see if the water is polluted and the fish unhealthy.

*Advocacy is using one's power and influence to educate and motivate decision-makers about the changes needed.*

The first part of the saying: “give a person a fish” is charity, the meeting of immediate need. The second is a form of advocacy...teaching the person how to do for himself or herself. Advocacy is speaking out to decision-makers about the changes needed, by a concerned group or by the affected individuals or groups.

### Response C: Adding Systemic Change

The last part, the problems and concerns that might arise, are situations that require systemic change, that is, the changing of the systems that govern and affect the ability of individuals, families and communities to meet their own needs.

*Acting for Systemic Change is working to alter the inter-relational structures - government, economics, politics, religion, education, culture - that affect the ability of individuals or groups to meet their own needs.*

Working for systemic change is about adding our power and our voices to the work of changing laws, changing rules, changing structures and relationships so that the social and economic systems that govern on all levels are built upon the core values used as lenses in this project: human rights, sustainability, security and the ability to address the underlying realities that are the basis for the UN Millennium Development Goals.

# CONCLUSION

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A CHOICE

There comes a time in every project, in the writing of the report of a project, when the power to create change has to be passed to the reader. It is tempting to want to write more, to add more photos, to provide more constructs to analyze the data or more lenses through which to look at the reality that the data describes. There comes a time when what we have seen and come to know needs to be passed to those of you who will read this report.

In the three sectors described in this report: coffee, crafts and the maquilas, the struggle for a sustainable living wage/income continues. It is obvious that wage/income levels possible in these sectors still do not allow workers to adequately provide for themselves and their families. But these wage/income levels are not just inadequate; they also need to be recognized as violations of that Declaration issued 60 years ago acknowledging the rights of each and all human beings. The struggle to achieve an economic system that respects those rights and provides the needed income still continues.

It is obvious that the search for sufficient wages/income breaks apart families as those who are the wage earners and income providers in the family travel wherever necessary to find sufficient work. There is no security when a family needs to be torn apart in the search for adequate wages/income. There is no financial security, no social security.

It is obvious that there are some who benefit more than others from this global economic system that has evolved and developed over time. In fact, there are those who benefit totally out of proportion to the amount of labor done. We need to ask: Who is being sustained? What is being sustained in this global economy? We need to be willing to ask these questions.

The data invites us to examine what we buy and use and how the production of those items affects the lives of those who produce them. Our sense of what it means to be truly human requires that this examination take the form of conscious choice.

Hopefully, in reading this report, the data has been sufficiently contextualized for you within the lives of the people whose work and resulting income is being described. Hopefully, when you look at a product and decide that it is acceptable for your use, you will also ask whether the work on that product has provided an acceptable level of income for the workers, an acceptability founded on human rights and the search for security and sustainability.

Hopefully, in thinking about the data, and the story that the data illustrates, your thoughts have evolved from being concerned that wages are paid simply according to the legal minimum wage to a standard of just wages.

Hopefully, when you consider what is affordable for you and those about whom you care, you will also reflect on what is affordable for those who make whatever you are buying. Hopefully, you will question what it is like when the things you need are not access-able, simply because you lack the money to pay for them. Hopefully, you will wonder what it is like not to be able to provide for your family, your children, those whom you love.

Hopefully, you will be moved beyond the responses of charity and advocacy, as important as they are, to the work of systemic change.

## CONCLUSION

Here at CREA, we have a small plaque, given to us by friends, with the famous quote from Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” While not claiming the genius that was Einstein’s, we would differ with his statement. We do the same type of research over and over in country after country, community after community. We use the data to tell the story of the reality of life for people in those countries and communities. We tell the story of the effect of the lack of sustainable living wages/income for workers, their families and their communities. And we do expect that as people read the reports and reflect on the realities they describe...someday, eventually, there will be enough seeing, enough data, enough energy to create a sufficient momentum to truly want to do something.

The readers, they, you, will want to respond, to *do* something. As described in the constructs, acts of charity, good works, are the most immediate response of most people. However, if we truly learn to see thru the lenses of human rights, sustainability and security, we know that charity is not enough. Yes, the works of charity will meet the immediate needs of some, but that is not enough to really bring about the systemic changes that are needed.

The fourth lens, the UN Millennium Development Goals, designed to address the systemic poverty that is the day to day reality of millions around the world, are both our challenge and one of our measuring sticks of progress.

It is our belief that change is possible. We know that it is necessary. We hope you share that belief.

To be continued...

# CONCLUSION

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## CONCLUSION

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