



2020

ANNUAL REPORT

COLECTIVO VIDA DIGNA

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear Friends,

The Colectivo Vida Digna family would like to share our achievements during 2020. As our elders say, this year has been one of great learning and great resistance. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted our communities economically, politically and culturally, but these challenges did not stop our work. Thanks to the financial, emotional and spiritual support that we received from you, our donors, we engaged in diverse initiatives in solidarity with Indigenous communities in Guatemala. We dedicate this annual report to our elders whose wisdom guides us through this time of great uncertainty.

May the energies of the cosmos and Mother Nature strengthen your work and family life, as it has ours.

Ramona Johana López Aguilón
Maya Mam
President

OUR WORK

Colectivo Vida Digna is a Mayan organization in the western highlands of Guatemala dedicated to affirming Indigenous identities. We support young people, women and families from the countryside to fulfill their potential and for the growth of their communities. Building from a belief and commitment to decolonization, we enlist an interdisciplinary approach – including community-based economics, agronomy, education, art and socio-cultural studies – to strengthen the abilities of Indigenous youth and their families.

Colectivo Vida Digna works together with Indigenous peoples from rural areas of Guatemala who continue to be excluded from access to basic rights and justice. Many community members have sought migration in the hopes of leaving behind deep-rooted structural barriers, but they often are compelled to leave their Indigenous identity at home as well. At Vida Digna, we believe ‘getting ahead’ is not getting away from the land but understanding our connection to it. Rivers for us are the blood that travels through us; if we lose the land, they’ve taken our hearts as well. ‘Getting ahead,’ then, is about recognizing that life, and our understanding of it, comes through nature.

Our services include educational scholarships and workshops, technical support on small-scale agricultural and livestock initiatives, counseling, and work orientation. Since beginning our efforts in 2010, we have found that youth have so much to teach us. They continuously enrich our understanding of life, dreams, voice, and self determination.

Mission

Our mission is to facilitate a space where Indigenous young people, women, and families from the Guatemalan countryside can develop their abilities and talents, while also supporting emerging voices around collective rights, cultural expression, complementary economics, and forced migration.

Vision

Our vision is to establish a center for decolonization, ancestral knowledge and forced migration that extends beyond geopolitical borders. As a space of learning and praxis for cultural knowledge and complementary economic initiatives, we hope our collaborative approach will serve as a model for direct support to youth and families in migration contexts.



YOUTH & MIGRATION

In 2010, in partnership with Washington, D.C.-based Kids in Need of Defense, Colectivo Vida Digna initiated the first bi-national program for unaccompanied migrant children and youth who are detained in the United States and returned to Guatemala. A decade later, we have expanded our program to include services with a family focus. Maya Mam attorney María García explains some of the challenges young people and their families confront: *“When young people return to Guatemala, the system is quite difficult to maneuver. Public officials are very demeaning to Indigenous people. Traveling from the countryside to the capital city is overwhelming. And, there are no public translation services, even though there are 25 languages spoken in the country.”*

We serve as advocates for young people and their families as they navigate the logistical, emotional, and financial challenges of return. In the process, we identify and build on young people’s skills and talents by devising personalized economic and educational plans. María describes, *“Every family has multiple sources of livelihood that include working the land, tending to farm animals and family businesses. They also possess skills like weaving and carpentry. These skills, when honed, help communities to assure their autonomy as Indigenous peoples.”* We advise young people to strive for quality as they combine ancestral and modern techniques to their work.

Vida Digna facilitates opportunities for education, vocational training, and political conscientization as youth and their families seek a dignified life.



FAMILY ECONOMY & AGRICULTURE

In 2018, the United States enacted a “zero tolerance” policy on immigration, forcibly separating over 5,500 children from their family members at the border. In addition to helping separated families with reunification support, we worked with young parents by aiding their agricultural practices and commercialization skills in an effort to assure sustenance. This work is more important now than ever as many people have lost their jobs during the coronavirus pandemic and malnutrition has soared.

Agriculture is the backbone of the Guatemalan economy, and corn is the basic element of the crops each family in the countryside has to assure the nutrition of their families. Maya Tz’utujil agricultural technician Juan Pacay explains: *“Many families migrate to look for work because they struggle to feed their families. The purpose of our efforts is for people to have work that is dignified, not just employment. We work together with the families to identify the resources available to them, to teach them a variety of skills to produce more robust crops for their families, and to sell surplus produce as a new source of income. Participants teach us about the land and times to harvest, and we have taught them ways to regenerate the soil and use natural pesticides. Since doctors are not readily accessible, we have also been working together with families in a medicinal plant project for the prevention of diseases.”*

In 2020, Vida Digna also worked to strengthen agriculture and livestock practices including poultry farming and the growing of rosemary and insulin.



IX KAME

LEARNING CENTER

Mayan girls and women face dual discrimination for being female and Indigenous, yet we are also the conveyers of Mayan culture. The Ix Kame Learning Center provides workshops and training to young women about their bodies, sexualities, relationships, and skills while helping them to develop their voices, critical perspectives, and economic means to promote autonomy. Maya Mam educator and coordinator Aida López reflects: *"We begin by paying homage to our own practices as Indigenous peoples around sexuality and health. We delve into Mayan curative sciences like the use of the Tuj (traditional sauna); we learn from midwives and spiritual healers; and we study the Mayan calendar which is so central to our beliefs, known as Cosmovision. I love this work because we are teaching young women to value our ancestral knowledge and themselves."*

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, and as part of the complementary economics program, young women of Ix Kame designed hand-embroidered face masks to be sold in our store, Candelas Kame. They enlisted and refined their traditional weaving and embroidering practices, while learning about design, marketing, and administration. To date, they have earned US\$2,000 (Q15,200) in sales. We are proud to say that community members publicly have recognized these young women for their commitment to the health of their communities and view them as aspiring community organizers.



At the heart of the Colectivo Vida Digna team are the spiritual guides, known in Guatemala as Contadores del Tiempo, or those who interpret time and space. They help people to understand their lives through ancestral practices and rituals. Our economic initiative Candelas Kame, is a store with materials for Mayan fire ceremonies and products from local communities, including natural medicines, handwoven textiles, candles, cacao, among others.

Now in its third year, Maya Mam spiritual guide and artist Judiel López is transforming Candelas Kame into a renowned center for psychological and spiritual orientation. *"People come from far away to visit our store and ask for advice on different family and personal problems. So it has become much more than a store that sells community products; it's also a place for consultations and, most recently, a place where spiritual guides meet to deepen their research on culture and orientation in service to the population."*

In our daily work, spiritual guides remind us that the Mayan Calendar is neither static nor a thing of the past but a process of constant discovery; it is part of human understanding of our surroundings and the universe.



SPECIAL INITIATIVE

DIGNITY BASKETS

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic and multiple tropical storms ravaged Guatemala; meanwhile, deportations continued. In response, Colectivo Vida Digna provided emergency support to families in need and launched two special initiatives: Canastas Dignas (Dignity Baskets) and Mercados Dignos (Dignified Markets).

In the initial months of the pandemic, we quickly noticed that rural Indigenous people were excluded from government relief programs and unable to access public health care. Mayan midwives, spiritual guides and healers, are people who have always provided their services to the community. However, with the threat of the coronavirus, their personal safety and health was at stake. With an outpouring of support from donors, Vida Digna teamed with young returnees to distribute Canastas Dignas (Dignity Baskets). The baskets included a month's supply of groceries purchased from local farmers, cleaning products, and personal protective equipment. In addition, we provided baskets to families recently affected by deportation and to elders in agricultural communities.

In the distribution of baskets, 24 youth participated and acquired fundamental knowledge about public health, taking the lead in addressing critical disparities affecting Indigenous communities. These visits and exchanges are a gesture of our appreciation of Mayan knowledge and culture.



SPECIAL INITIATIVE DIGNIFIED MARKETS

Local and neighborhood markets are critical contributors to the Guatemalan economy and provide accessible options for healthy foods for rural communities. Markets are also essential sites for the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life. Yet, beginning in March, the government unilaterally curtailed key markets, claiming they were unsafe and unsanitary, while allowing large, more-costly supermarkets to remain open. The consequences were immediately devastating. Overnight, small farmers and merchants lost their income; truckloads of produce rotted; and people all over the country were left without food.

With a grant from Seattle International Foundation in Central American Donors Forum supplemented by private donations, we launched Mercados Dignos (Dignified Markets). In partnership with the market committee and in communication with local authorities, youth from Colectivo Vida Digna established a daily sanitation regimen within the markets and launched a public information campaign regarding new safety procedures that included occupancy limits, physical distancing, mask wearing, and public sanitation stations. Mercados Dignos enabled vendors from Mercado de las Flores in Quetzaltenango to organize and to begin to redress the food insecurity currently raging in the region.

Our work with Mercados Dignos has not ended. We continue to expand our efforts to new markets, to advocate with the local government to create a space for adequate garbage disposal, and to ensure that the voices of merchants are heard and heeded.



THE YEAR TO COME

In our Mayan Calendar, the new year begins on March 4th and the eagle will be our guiding energy for the next year. We look forward to bringing you new and transformed programs with a vision that unifies the voices of young people and elders. Our calendar of events includes new Mayan arts and cultural events beginning with the presentation of a new book entitled *Fuego* about sacred ceremonial sites in the Highlands written by Vida Digna's General Coordinator, Carlos Escalante Villagrán. We look forward to supporting Mayan communities enlisting Kajib Ix, a community-based model for mutual aid, food sovereignty, and study-practice rooted in values and ancestral knowledge.

In the coming year, we will also work toward purchasing land in order to lay the foundation for a center where we can welcome young people and their families from across the country. Stay tuned to our social media for updates in 2021!

At Vida Digna we are committed to helping youth in all areas of their lives, supporting them as they develop their consciousness responsibly and freely in their communities. We invite you to contact us if you are interested in forming part of our transnational advocacy efforts, endeavoring in a joint research initiative, or wish to support the construction of our new center.

OUR IMPACT



Youth & Migration

- 336 participants
- 68 children received educational support and scholarships
- 42 return migrants participated in specialized economic initiatives



Family Economy & Agriculture

- 135 participants from 9 departments
- 55 individuals received technical training in farm animal management
- 69 people initiated new agricultural and commercial activities



Ix Kame Learning Center

- 81 youth participants in the Sexuality and Maya Curative Sciences program
- 32 youth participated in the Complementary Economics program
- 25 families received counseling services



Dignity Baskets

- 938 people from 18 communities received baskets
- 137 health and hygiene talks
- 24 youth organizers



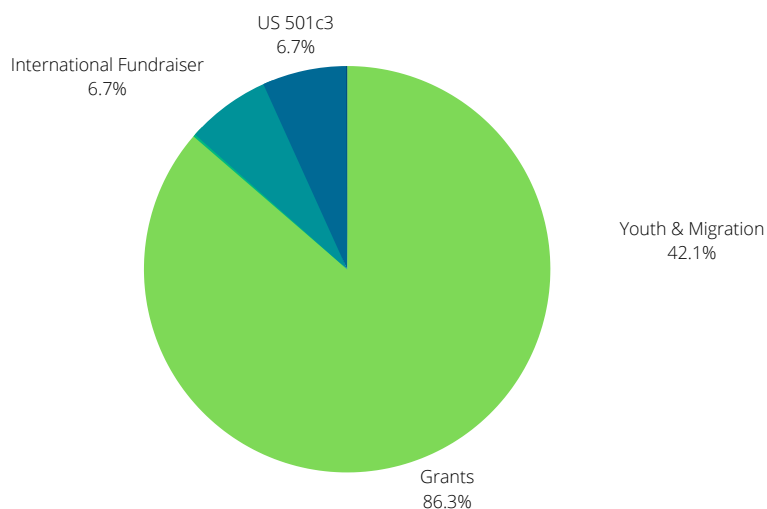
Dignified Markets

- 132 vendors from 12 municipalities received supplies and orientation
- Sanitary protocols implemented in 2 community markets
- \$2260 in cleaning supplies distributed

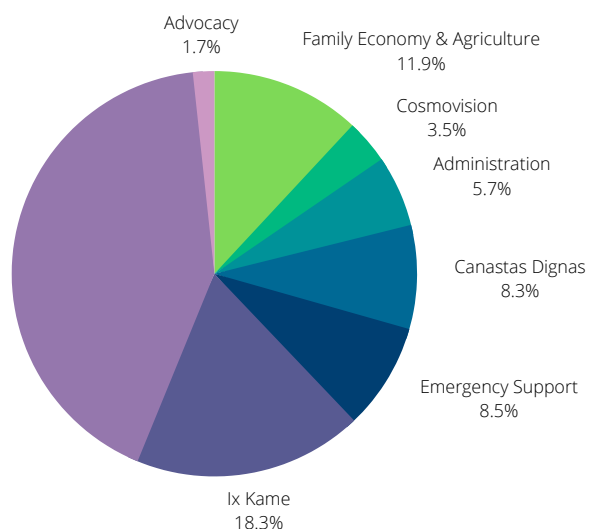


Asociación Colectivo Vida Digna is incorporated as a charitable organization in Guatemala (NIT: 9276072-4). Asociación Colectivo Vida Digna works in partnership with Vida Digna, Inc., a not-for-profit organization recognized as a 501c3 in the United States (EIN: 83-2802878) and incorporated in New Jersey. This statement includes Asociación Colectivo Vida Digna and Vida Digna, Inc.'s fiscal year, which covers January 1 to December 31, 2020.

REVENUE



EXPENSES



ASSETS

End of year assets	\$2,114
Unrestricted assets	\$5,483
Restricted assets	\$7,040
Vida Digna, Inc. Assets	\$8,096
Net assets at year end	\$22,733



CHJONTE. MALTYOX. GRACIAS. THANK YOU.

We are deeply grateful to you, our donors and funding partners past and present.
You make our work possible!

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"The Guatemala that we
Mayans long for is in our very
abilities and with the guidance
of our history traced in the
knowledge of our own hands. It
is the one we are working to
build."

CARLOS ESCALANTE
MAYA K'ICHE' SPIRITUAL
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