



Coexistence International at
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Background

The small tropical country of Belize, formerly called British Honduras, is geographically part of two different sub-regions in the Americas.¹ Belize is one of the seven countries that comprise the sub-region of Central America and is unique among these Spanish-speaking countries for a number of reasons, including the fact that it is the only Central American country that has English as its national language. Belize, along with the island nations of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Bahamas, and others, is also a part of the Caribbean sub-region.

Belize is a member of SICA, the Central American Integration System, a regional body that coordinates policy between members and targets poverty alleviation and social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental development. Belize is also an active member of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), whose mission is to create a common market and integrated community within the Caribbean. Belize, with the United States, Canada, Mexico, and other countries in the region, is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS) and, as a former British colony, is also a member of the British Commonwealth.

As part of both Central America and the Caribbean, Belize has a uniquely dual character, both culturally and politically.



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The twofold nature of the country and its shared history with these distinct sub-regions has, to some degree, shaped Belize's response to ethnic diversity and coexistence. Belize, with its Caribbean neighbors, shares the history of slavery and the painful legacy left by that institution; but unlike most other Caribbean countries, Belize also has the richness and challenges of a viable indigenous population. It also has strong Latino influences in its national culture, including the common use of the Spanish language by many of its inhabitants.

The area of Belize is 8,866 square miles, including 266 square miles of islands.² The country is bordered on the north by the Yucatan state in Mexico and on the south and west by Guatemala. The Caribbean Sea borders the entire eastern coast. One contemporary commentator noted that Belize's geography may have helped influence the Belizean personality. Because Belize is not an island, escaped slaves had the opportunity to flee to neighboring lands, unlike slaves on the islands of, for example, Jamaica or Barbados. In those countries, since there was nowhere to run, escaped slaves plotted rebellions and fought in order to throw off the inhumane shackles of slavery. It is hypothesized that this engendered in them and their descendants a tradition of resistance and a fighting spirit that did not develop in Belizeans, at least partly because of Belize's physical terrain.³

The Spaniards were the first Europeans who came to Belize, followed by English settlers. After various battles between Spain and Britain over the territory, the countries entered into two treaties, with Britain claiming the territory as its colony. The British brought enslaved Africans to Belize (or British Honduras, as it was then known) to work in the timber industry. The mixture of the British and Africans created what evolved into today's Creole population.

After being expelled by the British from St. Vincent in 1797, the Garifuna people (an Afro-indigenous people descended from Carib Indians and escaped African slaves) migrated to and settled in Central American countries along the Caribbean coast, including Belize.⁴ In Belize, the Garifuna settled in the Stann Creek District in the south of the country. They were primarily farmers and fishermen. During the colonization era, the British fostered division between the enslaved Africans and their descendants (Creoles) and

the free Garifuna, also people of African descent. The Garifuna were targets of degrading insults, such as being called "cannibals," and were also subjected to discriminatory treatment, such as restrictions on their travel in Belize.

The Yucatec Maya fled the Caste Wars, a revolt of indigenous peoples against the people of European descent in Mexico, and settled in northern Belize. They intermingled with the Spaniards, and their offspring over generations became known as Mestizos. The descendants of Mexicans or other Central American immigrants who migrated to Belize because of war or other reasons are also categorized as Mestizos.

The Mopan- and K'ekchi-speaking Maya live almost exclusively in Southern Belize. They retain not only the language, clothing, and religious ceremonies of their ancestors but the rotational farming and communal use of land,⁵ distinguishing them from other Belizeans engaged in agriculture.

For the most part, in the years prior to independence, these four major ethnic groups (Creole, Mestizo, Garifuna, and Maya) occupied different geographical areas of Belize and were involved in different economic enterprises. As a consequence, they were not in much contact or conflict with each other. They did, however, have set views, largely based on stereotypes, about the other groups.

Movements to gain independence from the British and to strengthen nascent trade unions helped build cohesion among the ethnic groups of Belize.

"During popular debates held before independence was achieved..., Garifuna women and men were popular theorists and social spokespersons in favour of the idea that independence politics was going to be the backbone of a new multiethnic and multicultural political entity. ...independence was not only good news for the rights of the Garifuna but also for other ethnic groups established in Belize."⁶

After over one hundred years of colonization, Belize peacefully gained its independence from Britain on September 21, 1981. At independence, Belize adopted a

written constitution⁷ and the Westminster model of government, mimicking its colonizer's form of parliamentary democracy.

Post independence, Belize's ethnic groups have had greater interaction with each other, including inter-marriage. Belize is viewed as a multicultural success story by many because of the positive relations between disparate groups and the lack of violent conflict. Low levels of ethnic tension and conflict do exist but, because they are usually subtle and rarely result in violence, the government tends to ignore or deny their existence. Recent changes in demographics and shifting national and regional politics, however, mean that underlying tensions between groups must be explicitly addressed if the population is to continue living in relative harmony.

Current State of Coexistence

Belize is a complex society with a delicate ethnic and social balance.⁸ The mid-term census in 2006 had the population of Belize at 301,000.⁹ Although the life expectancy in Belize is 70 years, the country is a very young one demographically. Of the total population, 60% are under 25 years of age and 6% are 60 years or older.¹⁰ One-third of the population lives below the poverty line.¹¹ Ten percent of households are so poor that they cannot meet their basic needs, including food needs.¹² Political and economic power is generally vested with lighter skinned Creole and Mestizo families, who make up the country's elite. In addition, much of Belize's privately owned land is deeded to foreigners, especially U.S. citizens.

The four groups who initially formed modern Belize (the Maya, the Creole, the Mestizo, and the Garifuna) remain the dominant cultural groups in the country today, although they have been joined by newer immigrant groups. The Creoles comprised the majority of Belize's population until about decade ago, when the Mestizo population became dominant.¹³ (The 1980 census listed the Creoles at nearly 40% of Belize's population, but now they've dropped to 25%.) Still, the Creoles are the group "most commonly said to define national culture and identity."¹⁴ The Creole population speaks the Creole (Kriol) language, an English patois. Creole is the lingua franca of Belize, with almost every group, including newcomers, speaking some version of it in everyday transactions and communications. An example of the pervasiveness of the Creole language in Belize is that the poultry company owned and operated by the Mennonites, providing chicken to virtually all of Belize, bears a Creole name, "Dis Da Fa We Chiken." Periodically you will hear lawyers sprinkle their courtroom submissions with Creole to ensure comprehension by the jury or

witnesses. Although English is Belize's national language, you will hear Creole spoken on streets throughout the nation on a daily basis. Television and radio news is in Standard English, but commercials and talk shows are in Creole and English or sometimes exclusively in Creole. There is a weekly national newspaper column devoted to teaching the written Creole language.¹⁵ There is also a movement by the National Kriol Council advocating that the language be used formally in the nation's schools since it is the common language among a multilingual student population. Within the Creole population, there is some stratification based on physical features. The colonial bias in favor of lighter skin and European features still factors in modern Belizean society.

The influx of approximately 40,000 migrants and refugees from surrounding Spanish-speaking Central American countries over a ten-year period has helped to significantly change the demographics of Belize, shifting them in favor of the Mestizos. During the civil wars in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, Belize was one of the few non-warring countries in which people could seek safe haven. Because of this, "the ethnic make-up is changing and the use of Spanish is on the rise, boosted by an amnesty for many immigrants from neighboring Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua."¹⁶ The dominance of Mestizos and Spanish-speaking immigrants has resulted in heightened antagonisms with the Creole people. There are often murmurings about how every job requires that you speak Spanish and how the upper management at the banks and other establishments are Mestizo rather than Creole. As for the poorer Spanish-speaking migrants, they are blamed for increased crime and said to have more rights than locals. They are referred to negatively as "aliens." Party politics increasingly reflect a split between Creole and Mestizo, and in the past some politicians have played on resentment of the growing "Hispanicization" of Belize at election time.¹⁷

In the 2000 census, the Garifuna people made up 6.1% of Belize's population.¹⁸ The Garifuna speak a distinct language that is an amalgamation of African, Carib, European, and other languages. The Garifuna have a history that sets them apart from the Creole population, although both are of African descent. It appears that the ancestors of the Garifuna escaped from a slave ship and entered the Western Hemisphere as free people, not an enslaved group. They then moved from St. Vincent to Belize and other Central American countries along the coast after being expelled from the island by British settlers. They continue to practice their culture, which involves religious ceremonies with African and Carib roots.

The Yucatec, Mopan, and K'ekchi together form the Maya indigenous people of Belize, having inhabited Central

America from before contact with Europeans. Respectively they make up 1.4%, 3.9%, and 5.3% of Belize's population. The Maya Mopan and K'ekchi live predominately in the southernmost district of Toledo. They, like indigenous peoples in many countries, have generally been unable to benefit from the country's economic growth because of their concentration in rural areas.

Other ethnic groups in Belize include the Mennonites, the Chinese, the East Indians, and people of Arab descent (Lebanese, Afghani, Palestinian). Although each of these groups represents a small portion of the population, they are very visible within Belizean society. These minority groups are economically powerful and have a considerable amount of political control. The current Prime Minister and several ministers of government are of Arab descent.

Belize is a predominantly Christian society, with nearly 50% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic and 27% as Protestants.¹⁹ This includes the sizable community of Mennonites (approximately 4%), who relocated to Belize from enclaves in North America and Mexico in search of freedom from religious persecution and the pressures of modern society. They signed a special agreement with the Belize government that guarantees them complete freedom to adhere to their traditional way of life and to practice and farm within their distinct communities. It also exempted them from military service and some forms of taxation. The Mennonite communities have control of their own form of local government and run their own schools, banks, and businesses.²⁰ Much of the remaining population follows the religious traditions of their respective immigrant communities, such as Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam. Many Garifuna people also incorporate elements of their traditional beliefs into their Christian practices. Religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution.

Policies and Initiatives

The government of Belize has no national minority or immigration policy, no hate crime legislation, and has yet to adopt any policy dealing with the indigenous peoples within its borders. The language of cultural autonomy and self-determination is seldom addressed by the various ethnic groups in Belize, with the notable exception of the Maya; and these concepts are not generally part of the lexicon of Belizean politicians and others in authority.

Human Rights

Belize does have an emerging rights culture and this, most naturally, is a necessary foundation for positive coexistence in society. Chapter two of the Belize Constitution,²¹ entitled "Protection of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms," provides

the legal underpinnings for the rights culture. In sections 3, 6, and 16 of the supreme law of the land, the constitution provides for equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex, race, place of origin, political opinions, color, or creed.

Additionally, the preamble of the Belize Constitution states that the people of Belize,

require policies of state...which eliminate economic and social privilege and disparity among the citizens of Belize whether by race, ethnicity, colour, creed, disability or sex;...(and) which protect the identity, dignity and social and cultural values of Belizeans, including Belize's indigenous peoples;²²

The inclusion of the words "indigenous peoples" in this section of the preamble came in 2001, only after lobbying by Belize's indigenous leadership.

Additionally in 2001, Belize ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. At the same time, the government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (the Race Convention). These were important progressive steps by Belize; however, there has been little follow up or public education about the country's obligations as a party to these two international human rights conventions.

Immigration

As stated above, in recent decades Belize has received large waves of immigration from its neighbors as these countries experienced destabilizing conflicts. At the same time, large numbers of Afro-Belizeans (Creole and Garifuna) were emigrating to the United States. This has resulted in a restructuring of the ethnic makeup of the country, with the above-mentioned increases in the Mestizo population and decreases in nearly every other major ethnic group. Often, the spatial distribution of both established communities and new immigrant communities has created ethnic enclaves, with certain cities or neighborhoods dominated by one group or the other. For instance, the Mestizo population is a clear majority in the Orange Walk and Corozal districts of Belize, while the Creoles are concentrated in Belize City and the Garifuna are located mainly in the southern districts. The Maya are settled mainly on the borders with Guatemala and Mexico.²³ The increased immigration from other Central American countries has resulted in discrimination and resentment targeted at immigrant populations, mainly through verbal mistreatment rather than actual violence. Immigrants from Central America generally find themselves in the lowest paid, least desirable jobs in Belize, working unskilled jobs in the sugar, citrus, and

banana industries.

A long-standing border dispute with Guatemala has contributed to tensions between citizens of Belize and migrants from Guatemala. Guatemalan peasants seeking land and haven from their country's civil war have crossed the indistinct border for decades. Belizean officials claim these farmers are invading their territory and destroying the environment by practicing slash-and-burn farming.²⁴ After mediations by the Organization of American States, the two countries have now agreed to take the dispute to the International Court of Justice in order to find a "fair, equitable, and definitive solution" to this long-running conflict.²⁵

In 1999 the government of Belize instituted an amnesty program offering undocumented migrants the opportunity to regularize their immigration status in Belize. Approximately 4,709 migrants benefited from the program.²⁶ As of 2007, the government had "no formal procedure in place to accept or resettle refugees."²⁷ A Belizean NGO, Help for Progress, has acted as the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees' implementing partner in the country by assisting with some refugee cases and advocating for Belize to develop a system to process refugees in accordance with the country's ratification of the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Indigenous Communities

In October 2000, after lengthy negotiations between the government and the Mopan and K'ekchi Maya communities, the Prime Minister and five representative Maya organizations signed the "Ten Points of Agreement," outlining issues of importance to the Maya community and acknowledging, most significantly, that the Maya have rights to the land that they have traditionally used and occupied in Belize. The "Ten Points of Agreement" called for ongoing discussions between the government and indigenous leaders to resolve the land-rights claim and the economic disparity between the Maya communities and the rest of the country's population. This initiative did not result in the progress hoped for by the indigenous communities. In 2004, four years after the Ten Points had been signed, the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission of Human Rights declared in an official report that Belize was violating the rights of the Maya of southern Belize by, among other things, its failure to legally recognize their land rights and implement the Ten Points of Agreement.²⁸ When it became clear that the government of Belize would not implement the recommendations given by the Inter-American Commission in the 2004 report, two Maya villages sued the government, claiming that their constitutional rights to property and equality had been breached by Belize and asking that the court declare and provide redress for the violations.²⁹ In

October 2007, the Supreme Court of Belize ruled in favor of the Maya land rights.

Culture

Another initiative by the government of Belize was the creation of the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) in 1998. This, and the Institute of Social and Cultural Research, are advances in studying, recognizing, and celebrating the multicultural makeup of Belize. One of the goals of NICH is to establish Houses of Culture in each of the six districts of Belize, which would "promote community participation in the arts as well as provide a venue for concerts and exhibitions."³⁰ Although this has yet to be done, it is a commendable aim that, when accomplished, should contribute concretely to the increased understanding and appreciation of the various cultures residing side by side in Belize.

Garifuna culture has received international attention in recent years through the music of Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective. Palacio used his music as a way to preserve Garifuna culture and language, which he saw as threatened by the modern reality of Belize. On his album *Wátina* Palacio sings, in Garifuna, "Parents, please listen to me. Teach the children our language and our songs, our beliefs and our dances."³¹ He also hoped to break down cultural barriers so that other Belizean groups could learn about and identify with the Garifuna culture. Before his death in January 2008, Palacio was designated a UNESCO Artist for Peace, as well as Cultural Ambassador for Belize.

Education

The Multi-Cultural Studies Centre at the University of Belize developed the African and Maya History Project in response to concerns about Belizean children's cultural identity and self-image, and how failings in this arena affect the development of the country. The project, in its fourth year, has completed the first cycle of instruction at the primary level and is proceeding to secondary students. The explanation of the project in the teachers' handbook states:

"The African and Maya History Project aims to strengthen the teaching of African and Maya civilizations in the primary, secondary and tertiary level systems of the schools of Belize. The overall purpose of the project is to strengthen pride in Belize's African and Maya heritage to complement the pride we have in Western civilization that dominates our worldview today. The project aims to positively contribute the building or strengthening of knowledge, skills, and values consistent with the long-term development of an invigorated, assertive, self-enriching, national Belizean identity."³²

Since the introduction of the project, student books and teacher guides have been published for the primary school level. In 2007, the project introduced a new history book called *Belize New Vision*, which teaches African and Maya civilization for the secondary school level.

Language

The 2000 census estimated that 70% of Belizeans are bi- or tri-lingual.³³ Although Creole is the lingua franca of the country, different ethnic groups are also fluent in their own native languages, and often the languages of other ethnic groups. Language can contribute to inter-group tensions in the nation, as it is often seen as a status symbol. The dominance of Creole as the language of Belizean national identity partly stems from ethnic stereotypes and remnants of colonial stratification based on the lighter skin and mixed ancestry of the Creoles, versus the African ancestry and customs of the Garifuna. The association of Garifuna language and identity with low socio-economic status has continued in the post-colonial period. Garifuna youth increasingly speak Creole in multilingual settings, and there is a decline in use of the Garifuna language among children and young adults. Scholars have blamed this tendency of Garifuna youth to speak Creole outside their communities on pressure to use the language “both as a means of increasing their status within the nation, and as a method for creating solidarity with Creoles in the face of the increasing ‘Spanish’ presence in the nation.”³⁴ This has been at the expense of Garifuna ethnic identity as they have seen their language marginalized within the country.

In addition, Spanish speakers in Belize are often greeted with resentment from the local Creole and Garifuna populations. This is mainly directed at the newer immigrants from other Central American countries, though it also often extends to Belizean Mestizos, Spanish Creoles, and the Maya population. The tensions between Belizeans and new immigrants are exacerbated by the fact that 46% of the population now speaks Spanish,³⁵ though Standard English remains the official language of the country, and Creole remains the unofficial language of day-to-day interactions.

Even within the Creole population, language proficiency has an effect on socio-economic status. While Creole is widely spoken, proficiency in Standard English is mostly the domain of foreigners, the middle and upper classes, and highly educated Belizeans. As Standard English is the sole language of instruction in schools, the lack of competency of most of the urban and rural poor poses a challenge for the education system and for the ability of these populations to experience upward socio-economic mobility.

Conclusion

It is popular for both the politicians and the ordinary man and woman on the street in Belize to say, “All a we da one.” This means that despite the diversity of color, language, and background of those who live in Belize, all in the country share the common identification of being Belizeans; and this, in and of itself, is a unifying and strengthening force. In his 2007 State of the Nation address, the Prime Minister of Belize said, “...We are on the way to creating a new 21st century cultural identity.”³⁶ Both of these statements may be generally positive and reinforcing of national cohesiveness, but they also ignore the very real and different needs of the various groups within Belize.

Belize appears, especially to the outside world, to be a multicultural success story. For those on the ground, however, the reality differs from the outside perception. Although there has not been ethnic warfare or blatant discrimination in contemporary Belize, there continue to be serious difficulties regarding coexistence in the country.

Belize faces many hurdles with respect to the future peaceful coexistence of its small but diverse population. The distribution and use of natural resources by wealthier foreign immigrants and the poorer local population is but one of the many challenges confronting the nation. The ongoing competition between Central American migrants and “roots” Belizeans (those born in Belize) for employment, housing, and educational opportunities is ever present. The Maya claim for respect of their culture and land rights continues to be unresolved. Chinese, African, and Caribbean migrants steadily arrive to make Belize their home, and present an ever more complex coexistence matrix for Belize to tackle.

Because of its history and distinctive national characteristics, many have said that Belize could serve as a bridge between Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Even more ambitious, Belize has the potential, in time, to evolve into one of the global models for peaceful coexistence. But first, Belize needs to develop explicit anti-discrimination and coexistence policies, and also to address the concerns of particular minority groups, such as the Maya and Garifuna. Furthermore, the country must come to grips with its changed demographics and decide how to proceed into the future for the benefit of all Belizeans.

Endnotes

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About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

Other CI Publications

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

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With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

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