

# Visualizing Better Nutrition

## *A Spotlight on Chris Bielecki, Texas A&M University*

### Innovators Connecting to Accelerate Global Development

#### The Story

Photographing your meal is a social media fad in wealthy countries. In rural Guatemala, it's a way to fight malnutrition, thanks to the creativity of Texas A&M University student Chris Bielecki and the support of the university's Howard GW Buffett Foundation Chair on Conflict and Development.

Bielecki, a Ph.D. student at Texas A&M, learned about the high incidence of malnutrition in Guatemala while studying Spanish there in 2007 and meeting the woman he would later marry. "Although her family ended up successfully starting a business and raising their standard of living, my wife was born in a house with no electricity, no water, and a dirt floor," he said. "Hearing the stories of my wife and in-laws made me interested in researching chronic malnutrition, which causes stunted growth, and how it affects both personal and societal development." In Guatemala, the government tracks malnutrition only when severe cases appear at the hospital. Bielecki wanted to explore ways of monitoring the nutritional quality of rural families' meals before it became a crisis.

Bielecki was inspired by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who empowered low-literacy people to depict their lives by taking photographs. Rather than knocking on rural families' doors and asking them to remember what they ate the previous month, or asking them to record it when they might be illiterate, Bielecki imagined giving them cameras and letting them photograph their meals.

Seeing Guatemala's poverty as an unhealed wound from the country's 36-year civil war, he submitted a proposal to the H.G. Buffett Foundation Chair on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M, which supports innovative ideas to research and chronicle issues in conflict-affected countries through its Student Media Grants Program.



*Ph.D. student Chris Bielecki distributes disposable cameras to members of a local health commission in Guatemala in July 2013 so low-income farmers can document their own food security. The project was funded through Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University, part of USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network. "Many participants not only expressed their appreciation of learning a new way to see nutrition in their community, but they were also grateful to learn how to operate a camera, which for most was a brand-new skill," Bielecki said.*

*Photo: Mayra Cabrera, Guatemala Ministry of Health. Courtesy Chris Bielecki.*



The Conflict and Development program at Texas A&M was selected for major funding through USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network to build upon efforts to study and support programs that reduce conflict by strengthening four pillars of development: food security, youth employment, natural resources management, and local institutions.

In May 2013, Bielecki headed to Guatemala with a box full of disposable cameras and distributed them to 21 farming families, with local health officials translating. Many of the families wondered what the fuss was about.

"To them, it was a foreign concept – 'Why would I take a picture of my food?'" Bielecki recounted. "What if I'm just eating potatoes for lunch?" I said, 'That's what we came to find out.'" Bielecki returned to Texas in August 2013 to develop the pictures and draw conclusions about the community's nutritional status. He mailed prints to the community health center for use in nutrition education. Since most of the families had never owned a camera, he'd encouraged them to use three shots on the roll for family photographs, and he mailed those back, too. "You get a deeper connection working with them with photos than if you knock on the door and ask questions and never see them again."

Bielecki hopes to expand the technique to a larger scale, perhaps using cellphone cameras, and would like to extend his work to other regions of the world.

Bielecki blogs about his work in international development at [chrisbielecki.tumblr.com](http://chrisbielecki.tumblr.com). You can learn more about the Student Media Grants Program at <http://condevcenter.org/smgp>.



Farm families in Guatemala used disposable cameras from Texas A&M's Chris Bielecki to depict their nutritional status. This farmer's main meal of the day consisted of black beans, tortillas, and a hot rice drink called atole.

Photo courtesy of Chris Bielecki, Conflict and Development at Texas A&M.

**For more information**

[www.usaid.gov/hesn](http://www.usaid.gov/hesn)