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Middle America:" Peoples resisting a colonial past that persists through imposition and violence

OUR VIEWPOINT

PEOPLES OF "MIDDLE AMERICA" FIGHTING FOR THEIR TERRITORIES AND ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION

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"Middle America": Peoples resisting a colonial past that persists through imposition and violence

When we think of the countries ranging from southern Mexico to Panama, we tend to speak of Central America. That is, in our imaginary, we use that name to describe the territory located between the southern and northern regions of the American continent. However, the histories, cultures, economies and politics of this region tell a different story, forcing us to reflect further on their boundaries and definitions.

While administratively, Central America comprises seven countries—Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama—some historians still demarcate the region according to limits established by one of the Spanish colonial viceroys, which would include what constitutes today the countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Meanwhile, anthropology defined Mesoamerica as the territories including the southern half of Mexico, the countries of Guatemala, Belize and El Salvador, and western Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica; where groups from Pre-Columbian Mexico and the Caribbean—such as the Mayas, Lencas, Pipiles, Kunas, Chorotegas, Nasos, Bribris, and others—settled and have inhabited these lands for millennia. We must not get confused by yet other divisions created by international organizations to attempt economic "integration," aimed at expanding neoliberal trade in these territories.

But the official, anthropological and colonial history does not take into account the other diverse stories that peoples, cultures and geographies tell us—those that have to do with cultural and political exchanges, resistance struggles, perceptions, and the formation of sacred places and territories—stories that give a sense of belonging to this "Middle America" in the broad sense of the word, from southern Mexico to Panama.

"Middle America" thus is a territory defined and redefined over the years by its peoples and cultures. Over time however, and especially since the colonial era, it has played a role in territorial disputes among European powers aiming to explore and control its

"natural resources"—with the Unites States entering in the late 19th Century. Its location is strategic because it offers a maritime shortcut between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Furthermore, it is a highly biodiverse region with forests and mangroves, fertile soils and a wealth of freshwater reserves; and it has huge oil and mineral reserves.

Throughout a little more than last century, these territories have alternated between liberation and social emancipation movements followed by bloody military dictatorships. The intense political violence and social persecution that continues today has not prevented resistance struggles from multiplying in every part of the region. However, with movements and grassroots organizations currently focused on defending their territories from the destructive extractive industries model, violations of human and collective rights have reached alarming levels.

This newsletter aims to support and honor these diverse peoples and their resistance struggles. Thus, it is focused on reflecting on that "Middle America;" that is, the territories defined by its peoples, stories and struggles, from southern Mexico to Panama. Working with allied organizations from these territories, WRM has sought to highlight the demands and struggles people have been engaged in for many years, to defend their forests, lands and cultures.

The push to expand monoculture plantations, mining and oil concessions, REDD+ style "conservation" projects, dams, and infrastructure projects, among others, has gone hand in hand with violent repression—with almost total impunity—of more and more people resisting this economic model that serves big capital. In the words of Berta Cáceres, indigenous leader killed in Honduras earlier this year, and whose legacy has transcended the territories of "Middle America:" "Mother Earth—militarized, fenced off, poisoned, where basic rights are systematically violated—demands that we act. Let us build societies able to coexist in a just and dignified way, for life. Let us join together and, with hope, continue defending and caring for the blood of the earth and her spirits."

We hope this newsletter helps shine a light on these struggles, in order to better understand the various processes seeking to impose upon these territories.

PEOPLES OF "MIDDLE AMERICA" FIGHTING FOR THEIR TERRITORIES AND ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION

Extractive Model: the dispossession of territories and the criminalization of protest in Central America

A war declared on peoples' right to decide and to live

Six months ago, in March of 2016, the news spread like lightning and the world shook: Murderous bullets had ended the life of indigenous Lenca leader and human rights defender Berta Cáceres, who had recently been awarded the prestigious 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize. Together with the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Copinh), of which she was coordinator, the activist had been carrying on a tireless struggle against the implementation and deepening of the extractive model in Honduras; in particular against the proliferation of hydroelectric and mining projects and the expansion of monocultures for agro-export.

In an interview I conducted for a German magazine about seven months before her assassination, Cáceres warned that in Honduras and throughout Central America, indigenous peoples were facing a "hegemonic project promoted by large national and transnational capital," with its interests in the energy, mining and agribusiness sectors. "The proponents of this strategy have imposed a profoundly neoliberal model based on the invasion and militarization of territories, and the looting and privatization of resources. They are advancing with the trans-nationalization of our lands, within the framework of a broader project of regional domination," Cáceres said (1).

With data in hand, the Honduran indigenous leader showed how after the coup of 2009, some 300 hydroelectric projects and no less than 870 mining projects were approved; meanwhile, the way was cleared to implement the Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEED) or "model cities" (2), and thousands of square kilometers of continental shelf were handed over to the British Gas Group for oil exploration. Tourism mega-projects were also promoted, as well as the uncontrolled expansion of large-scale monoculture, particularly sugar cane and African oil palm. Today, social and popular Honduran organizations claim that 35% of the country has

been handed over in concession to national and transnational corporations, and they claim that at no time was the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent respected, as provided by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

"Honduras is a totally militarized country awash in institutionalized corruption. What remains of its institutions serves only to guarantee the interests of national oligarchic groups and large transnational groups, i.e. those sectors that orchestrated the coup of 2009," noted Cáceres in the interview. These are complicit states that not only implement and deepen the neoliberal model through placing forests, rivers, valleys and land for sale, but also by criminalizing, persecuting and even killing those who oppose this exploitative project. The passage of laws limiting the right to assemble and protest in almost all Central American countries, as well as the toughening of social control policies, is proof of this.

"I have no doubt that it is State policy to criminalize and repress those who are committed to this struggle and to life. Indigenous peoples, black people and peasants who live this repression in our flesh—we know that there is a whole organized structure, planned and financed to pursue, repress and kill environmental defenders," denounced Cáceres a few months before her assassination.

Their constant criticism of and determined struggle against the extractive model and the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project—promoted by national firm *Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA)* with funds from European banks and multilateral agencies—cost Cáceres and four other Copinh members their lives. Last July, nature commons defender and activist Lesbia Yaneth Urquía, a close collaborator of Copinh, was also brutally murdered.

A trail of blood and death spreads throughout Central America.

Sights on Central America

A recent study by the Central American Institute of Fiscal Studies (ICEFI, for its Spanish acronym) noted that there were 107 mining concessions for metals already granted in Guatemala and 359 new applications (3). If we add the non-metallic extractive projects, such as quartz, marble, sand and gravel, gypsum, among others, the total reaches the overwhelming number of 973 projects. Guatemalan popular and social movements warned that in 2014, the total area under mining concession surpassed 32 thousand square kilometers, or almost 30% of the Guatemalan territory. One must add to this the huge amount of land in concession for other kinds of mega-projects and for the expansion of monocultures for agro-export.

In Nicaragua the situation is similar. In the report "Current state of the mining sector and its socio-environmental impacts in Nicaragua 2012-2013" (4), the environmental organization, Centro Humboldt, revealed that the total area under concession was nearly 18 thousand square kilometers, or 13.5% of national territory, with a total of 446 mining projects. The possible development of the Grand Interoceanic Canal, —which would be three times larger than the Panama canal at 278 kilometers long (105 km of which would pass underneath Lake Cocibolca), between 230 and 520 meters wide and 30 meters deep—other hydroelectric and mining projects, and the expansion of sugarcane

and African oil palm monoculture in the west and south-east, have increased that percentage.

While Costa Rica is known both within and beyond its borders as "the greenest and happiest country in the world," environmental and land conflicts have left a toll of terror and death. In his article "Of Jairo Mora and terrorism in Costa Rica" (*De Jairo Mora y el terrorismo in Costa Rica*), Mauricio Álvarez, president of the Costa Rican Federation for Environmental Conservation (Fecon) notes that several environmental defenders have been killed in recent decades (5). "In this small country, the State has perpetrated terrorism again and again. Sowing fear and using force to repress has ended up in the murder of people. This clear and concrete reality has nothing to do with the idyllic image on tourist postcards. Saying this is not comfortable, and is even dangerous," he notes.

In his other article, "Berta Cáceres and 50 more murders" (*Berta Cáceres y 50 asesinatos más*), the Costa Rican professor and ecologist asks whether hydroelectric energy can be "clean," if generating it produces the "collateral damage" of criminalization; persecution and even death of environmental activists and defenders; and the repression of indigenous and peasant communities throughout Central America (6). According to his research, 17 Guatemalan and 15 Honduran activists have been murdered in recent years, all of them committed to the fight against hydroelectric exploitation and energy privatization. Other murders related to mining and hydroelectric exploitation occurred in El Salvador and Panama.

"It is no coincidence that the social actors most affected by this kind of terrorism are environmentalists, farmers and indigenous people. The problem is structural. Conflicts over land—having it or defending it—and environmental conflicts have been part of a cycle of violence that keeps us far from any myth of peace and respect for human rights," Álvarez explains in his analysis.

One of the most emblematic cases of repression against groups organizing to resist the onslaught of the extractive and agribusiness model comes from the Aguán Valley in northeastern Honduras. According to national and international organizations who thoroughly monitored the region's human rights situation between 2010 and 2013, no less than 60 peasant farmers have been killed over the agrarian conflict—caused by the expansion of African oil palm monoculture and thousands of farming families' lack of access to land (7).

"These deaths are just the 'tip of the iceberg' of a system of impunity and terror that pervades each community that lives in violent repression. Stigmatization, prosecution, harassment, torture, disappearances and other practices have been established to prevent communities from asserting their rights to access, and to make decisions about, natural resources; and above all, to carry out their resistance and opposition," Álvarez says forcefully. "These are the real costs of the brutal logic of death in the name of 'development,' imposed on indigenous and peasant communities in the region. Can the energy from these projects be clean with so much bloodshed?" the Fecon president asks the reader rhetorically.

An upheaval of resistance and regional outrage

It is a model, then, that plunders nature, corners or expels people and entire villages from their lands, criminalizes and represses protest, and murders with total impunity.

In its report "How many more?" the organization Global Witness documents that in 2014, 116 environmental and land activists were killed, an average of two a week (8). Three quarters of these murders took place in Central and South America. Honduras was the most dangerous country for environmental and land activists per capita, with 101 murders between 2010 and 2014. 40% of these victims were indigenous, and the main causes of death were the hydroelectric, mining and agribusiness industries. "Disputes over ownership, control and use of land were an underlying factor in almost all killings...The true orchestrators of these crimes mostly escape investigation, but available information suggests that large landowners, business interests, political actors and agents of organized crime are often behind the violence," says Global Witness.

In 2015 it was worse. The new report "On dangerous ground" indicates that a total of 185 environmental and land defenders were killed, 66% of them in Latin America (9). More than three people a week were murdered for defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries. This is the highest recorded figure to date, with an increase of almost 60% compared to 2014.

Global Witness warns that land grabbing displaces indigenous peoples and peasant communities, causing serious clashes. "The environment has become a new battleground for human rights. With the ongoing demand for products such as timber, minerals and oil palm, governments, companies and criminal gangs exploit the land, disregarding the people who live on it," informs the latest report.

Despite repression, the resistance grows and calls for global solidarity. "Social and political unrest and indignation are growing, which is also the product of a renewed capacity for dialogue and coordination among groups in Honduras and Central America. A time bomb is building. It is important that organizations in solidarity from Europe and other regions of the world join and support this struggle, and put pressure on their governments and companies involved in these exploitative processes," Berta Cáceres concluded.

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(1) *Revista Presente, Iniciativa Cristiana Romero*, pages 10-11, http://www.ci-romero.de/de/presente_3_2015/
(2) A mechanism by which part of national territory is ceded to foreign investors, who set up productive activities in regions with an elevated level of political, economic, administrative and judicial autonomy and security.
(3) http://icefi.org/sites/default/files/la_mineria_en_guatemala_-_2da_edicion.pdf
(4) http://www.movimientom4.org/2014/04/estudio-estado-actual-del-sector-minero-y-sus-impactos-socio-ambientales-en-nicaragua/
(5) http://informa-tico.com/7-06-2016/jairo-mora-terrorismo-costa-rica
(6) http://www.feconcr.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2565&Itemid=73
(7) http://www6.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma_africana/index.htm
(8) https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/17895/Cuantos_mas_informe_mFxhXD1.pdf
(9) https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18483/En_Terreno_Peligroso.pdf

Expansion of Oil Palm Plantations as State Policy in Central America

Historical, environmental, labor and economic aspects converge in the expansion of oil palm plantations in Central America. The outsourcing of production, tax exemptions, support for free trade agreements, concentration of state subsidies, and "corporate responsibility" are common strategies that palm companies use. Even dates of experimentation and pilot plans to promote the expansion of oil palm plantations coincide in the region, as in the case of the Agúan Valley in Honduras and the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica that took place in the 50s and 60s.

There are over 370,000 hectares of officially registered lands with oil palm in Central America; this figure is increasing due to aggressive expansion, resulting from global demand. 51% of the vegetable oil consumed worldwide comes from palm. In particular, exports from Central America go to Mexico, the Unites States and the European Union. (1)

Palm oil is perhaps one of the fastest growing industries, and is regionally integrated as an agribusiness. But it stands out as being possibly the least studied crop in the region, in terms of its as yet immeasurable social and environmental impacts.

There are 130,000 hectares of palm plantations in **Guatemala**. In states where oil palm is grown, there are reports of communities and indigenous groups being displaced. (2) Such is the case of Sur de Petén, Izabal, Alta Verapaz, Quiché, Q´eqchí, Escuintla, Suchitepéquez, Quetzaltenengo, San Marcos and Retalhuleu, which are mostly farming and fishing communities. About 4% of the total agricultural land in the country is planted with this crop.

In the case of **Honduras**, oil palm plantations are one of the biggest drivers of deforestation and the loss of Garífuna and Miskita community territory. The agribusiness industry in Honduras is aggressive, and linked to political, military and drug trafficking powers. Officially 165,000 hectares are in cultivation, but this figure is poorly documented and is currently expanding, thanks to government policies and incentives.

The concentration of oil palm production in Honduras is not as pronounced; it is not exclusively the activity of large or transnational producers. Between 16 and 18 thousand producers in Honduras (cultivating 50 to 165 thousand hectares) are small producers. It should be noted that the number of registered hectares is the figure the companies publish, meaning it is probably underestimated—especially after the 2009 coup, when oil palm expansion, militarization and violence against peasant farmers began consolidating more aggressively. This situation is particularly evident in the Agúan Valley, where there have been many murders and disappearances inside the plantations. The company, DINANT, is at the center of the controversy around these crimes; this company, owned by the Facussé family, is the largest producer of palm oil in the country. (3)

Meanwhile, the **Costa Rican** agricultural census of 2014 reported 66,419 hectares of oil palm distributed in 2,169 farms, with 67% of these lands concentrated in only 8.6% of farms. Production is mainly for the food and cosmetics industries, although the government has attempted to incentivize oil palm production for biodiesel. According to figures from the National Chamber of Palm Producers (CANAPALMA by its Spanish acronym), 3% of producers in Costa Rica own 50% of the area in cultivation.

The intensive introduction of oil palm in Costa Rica began in the 1980s, even though experimentation is reported as early as the 1950s. The depletion of soils and heavy metal contamination—caused by excessive use of copper sulphate-based fungicides on banana plantations—rendered thousands of hectares of land too toxic for the musaceaes (banana family) and other crops that cannot survive with these elements in the soil.

This caused a decline in banana production in the area. Therefore, the United Fruit Company (the main multinational exporter at the time) aggressively swapped its plantations and infrastructure from the banana industry in the Costa Rican South Pacific, to the Caribbean region of the country in order to grow oil palm. They made this shift not only because the Caribbean region provided better humidity conditions that benefited oil palm cultivation; but also because this crop tolerates high concentrations of heavy metals in the soil, such as copper.

In 1973, the United Fruit Company had around 11,000 employees in the banana industry in the South Pacific region. After switching to oil palm, this company employed only 4,000 agricultural laborers in the late 1980s. While banana plantations on average employed one worker per hectare, now that same laborer could take care of 10 hectares of oil palm. This change in production also explains the unemployment generated in much of South Pacific region of Costa Rica starting in the 1980s.

According to some authors, the multinational United Fruit Company/United Brands supplied small local farmers with a productive alternative, credit and cutting-edge technology. However, it also controlled entry of the most profitable segments of the oil palm chain of production—through genetic material, industrialization, transport and commercialization. The State played a central role in establishing power relationships, by helping build infrastructure to process and industrialize the palm oil. This left the most profitable part of the business (sales) to the multinational company, which later changed its name to Chiquita Brands.

Promoting the cooperative oil palm sector is where state institutions have the most influence in Costa Rica. Through an initial US $31 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), another US $13 million loan from the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) of the UK government, and a state contribution of US $4 million, an Agroindustrial Development Project Operating Unit was launched in Coto Sur. This Unit not only would promote oil palm planting among small- and medium-scale producers, it would also enable construction of a processing plant to extract palm oil.

Currently, the Small Palm Producers Cooperative (COOPEAGROPAL, by its Spanish acronym) owes over 1.5 billion colones (approximately US$ 2.72 million) to the Costa Rican government in a trust at the National Bank, acquired to establish a palm oil extraction plant. This is exceptional, given that Costa Rica has opted to de-finance peasant agriculture, betting instead on public-private agribusiness investment. Thus began an industry marked by inequalities and strong economic interests.

Palma Tica S.A. controls the processing and commercialization of 80% of the raw palm oil, and this same company owns an estimated 40% of the total land planted with oil palm in the country, or approximately 24,800 hectares. In addition, about 19,200 hectares belong to independent producers with financing through mortgage credit from Palma Tica—which claims the entire production for 14 years as part of repayments. COOPEAGROPAL manages the remaining 31% of area planted, and sells around 20% of production.

Palma Tica S.A. is one of the four large companies of the Numar Group, a multinational that operates in Central America and Panama, specialized in the production, distribution and sale of processed foods. In 1995, the multinational Chiquita Brands sold the Numar Group for US $100 million to eight firms from Costa Rica, one from Panama and one from Belize. Later, in 2103, Chiquita Brands bought back the company.

The Numar Group, through its subsidiary Agricultural Services and Development (ASD), controls the entire oil palm supply and germplasm—not only for independent producers, but also for Palma Tica S.A. and COOPEAGROPAL. According to ASD, it has exported over 300 million seeds to virtually all oil palm producing countries in the world. In Latin America, about 65% of oil palm plantations use ASD seed varieties; throughout the world, over 11% of commercial oil palm plantations use their varieties. This demonstrates the multinational company's regional and global influence in the expansion of this monoculture.

Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras currently have policies on "biofuels," or rather agro-energy, which has intensified and stimulated the expansion of oil palm plantations. An example of this is the statements made by the National Federation of Palm Producers in Honduras (Fenapalmah, by its Spanish acronym), claiming that by September 2015, seven of every ten palm oil extraction plants were producing biomass energy.

Central America as a whole is undergoing a series of supposed economic and financial integration processes: electrical interconnection systems, regional free trade agreements, joint customs policies and infrastructure projects are currently some of their central strategies. In this sense, palm oil production can be seen not only as a regional project,

but as a race towards "economic integration," anchored in the production of export crops. Most affected are the people and communities that this expansion expels from their lands.

Monoculture expansion at the regional level is orchestrated without concern for borders or governments. In order to understand this regional phenomenon, one must see it as a whole and treat it as a large-scale business venture beyond the national proportions of each Central American country.

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(1) Map “Monocultivo de Palma Aceitera en América Latina”, Otros Mundos AC, GeoComunes, http://wrm.org.uy/es/files/2016/10/Mapa-Palma-Otros-Mundos-y-Geocomunes.jpeg
(2) Guatemala: Oil Palm Plantations Cause New Displacement of Rural Communities - http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section2/guatemala-oil-palm-plantations-cause-new-displacement-of-rural-communities/
Guatemala: Isla Chicales – Public Lands Should Be Managed by Communities - http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/guatemala-isla-chicales-public-lands-should-be-managed-by-communities/
(3) Bajo Aguán: *Grito por la Tierra* – http://wrm.org.uy/es/videos/bajo-aguan-grito-por-la-tierra/ ;
Honduras: Women fighting for land against a backdrop of violence and murders - http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/honduras-women-fighting-for-land-against-a-backdrop-of-violence-and-murders/

"Rivers to the sea, rivers to the mangroves"

Madre Vieja: The River that Reached the Sea

Over 30 years ago, African palm came to the coastal municipalities of Tiquisate and Nueva Concepción. Both share a boundary with the Madre Vieja River, which originates high in the Quiche and Chimaltenango mountains. According to local testimonies, when oil palm arrived in the region, so did other problems. "African palm began to divert the river toward the plantations," tells Don Juan, one of the older leaders of the community movement for the liberation of the River. It is common to hear people say that for over 15 years, the river hasn't reached the sea during the dry season. "It has become a river of sand, we could walk from one side to the other. We didn't have fish and the river didn't reach the mangroves," says local peasant, Fredy A...

On February 7, 2016, banana agribusiness representatives, sugar and African palm engineers, community representatives, the Catholic Church, municipal authorities—the mayor and council members—and environmental and human rights organizations, gather at the Municipal Hall of Nueva Concepción. The communities denounce the agribusinesses' theft of water, demanding that they open the river and remove its diversions so that the river can reach its mouth and the mangroves. Their discontent is focused on the Hame Group, producer of African palm.

Months ago, one of their companies—REPSA—was accused of the worst ecocide in recent history in Guatemala: the contamination of the La Pasión River. (1) Community discontent is huge, they want water, and they want their river back. The meeting closes with an agreement, and two days later the communities will verify compliance with the agreement: that the river reach the sea and that the diversions be removed.

Two days later, a long line of people heads toward the Pinar del Río plantations—where the Hame Group has placed one of its largest diversions—to verify compliance with the agreements. Many people are in doubt, because the river has not yet reached the sea. Guatemala is the only country in Central America that does not have a water law, and Hame Group has taken advantage of this, arguing that they have a usufruct inherited from the previous company operating on the land, United Fruit Company, to use a water canal.

Upon reaching the river bank, they observe a machine supposedly meant to lower the embankment, a 200-meter border of sand that diverts the water toward the Pinar del Río canal. At this moment, Hame Group representatives explain the work, but the leaders do not believe them. The companies have promised many times before to remove the diversions from the river, and this seems like a strategy to entertain the communities and authorities. The mayor decides to cross the waters of the Madre Vieja, heading toward the machinery with dozens of community members. He demands the operator remove the embankment, while the others watch from the other side of the river. Suddenly the machine reverses, digs, and raises its metal arm full of sand, beginning to remove part of the diversion. People can see that Pinar del Río is closing, and the waters of the Madre Vieja river are clearing rising. Many applaud with joy, because the river will finally reach the sea. (2) With great euphoria they ask to verify another diversion at the La Sierra farm.

The La Sierra diversion pushes water from the river toward sugarcane and banana plantations. Here, there is no machinery, or tools like shovels of pickaxes to remove the diversion, only hands. While the sugar cane plantation company representatives explain the history of the diversion and why it was built, a sound is heard—a woman throws a stone at the mouth of the diversion, where the waters enter toward the plantations. More people join her; they throw one, two, three, hundreds of stones into the river. What they are trying to do—to block the diversion into the canal leading to the plantations with stones—seems almost impossible. After 40 minutes they achieve what seemed impossible. The waters of the Madre Vieja are once again redirected, another success. The sugarcane representatives' discomfort is evident, and they go away.
That day the communities achieve three liberations. The media, along with members of environmental organizations like Redmanglar, Cogmanglar and Utzche, release the news on social networks. In the following days, various media headlines and news report on the people's achievement: the Madre Vieja river has been freed from a long kidnapping.

The river advances slowly, but it advances, its water levels rising. On February 14th, Alfredo A. from Isla Chicales, a community located near the mangroves at the mouth of the Madre Vieja river, cannot contain his joy as he announces that the river has reached the sea, the river has reached the mangrove.

Between February and March, the community movement carries out 18 more liberations of the Madre Vieja river. In February, a Technical Committee is convened to ensure compliance with the agreements. Several meetings and visits to monitor the situation in the field take place, in which specialists from government institutions, members of the municipality, communities, and members of environmental organizations are present. The inalienable point for communities is that as long as the river reaches the sea, there can be negotiations and dialogue. After several weeks, communities decide to stop participating in the meetings, expressing that the agreements have not been fulfilled, and that the agribusiness companies do not have a clear proposal or plan.

In April, the Social and Popular Assembly organizes the great March for Water, a movement that reclaims the human right to water for communities and nature. They come from La Meilla, from Tecún Umán, from Purulhá. They call themselves "the watersheds," like the three main watersheds of our country. (3) The people of Madre

Vieja join them, and later the southern watershed, made up of women from the Cajolá community, the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC, by its Spanish acronym), the Food Sovereignty Network and many other organizations and communities, joins. They form a fence with flags and sheets, displaying their slogan "rivers to the sea, rivers to the mangrove." In May, the rainy season will begin. The communities know that the river will carry water to its mouth, but for the leaders of Madre Vieja the fight is not over. Their concern now is what will happen next year.

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(1) Video by Friends of the Earth US, about contamination of the La Pasión river, based on a presentation by Saul Paau of the "Commission for the Defense of the Life and Nature of Sayaxté": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XKXvHrL-GY
(2) View the photo report http://wrm.org.uy/es/otra-informacion-relevante/galeria-fotografica-madre-vieja/
(3) “La marcha por el agua fue tremenda” by Magalí Rey Sosa https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/la-marcha-por-el-agua-fue-tremenda-y-70-diputados-que-votaron-favor-del-desvio-de-rios

Neocolonialism and plantations on the Garifuna Coast of Central America

"In the constitution of this small, maritime banana republic was a forgotten section." Cabbages and Kings, O. Henry

The Garifuna people arrived on the coasts of Central America 218 years ago, after having been expelled by the British Empire from San Vicente island. It was the last bastion of the Caribe people that had not been conquered by European powers, greedy to multiply sugar cane plantations in their overseas colonies. The Garifuna lived in isolation for a century, allowing us to preserve the culture of our indigenous Arawak-Caribe ancestors, until the arrival of the banana companies in Central America in the early twentieth century.

The state of Honduras ceded part of the territory we had occupied since 1797 to the banana companies, in exchange for construction of railways and port infrastructure. This marked the beginning of a process of deterritorialization of the Garifuna people which continues to this day; now enormous tracts of African oil palm have replaced the banana plantations.

From a New Orleans brothel to the Tegucigalpa Presidential Palace

On December 22, 1910, in an apparent night out, four men, being followed by the US Secret Service, entered a brothel in the city of New Orleans. At that time and in that port, it was common knowledge that an uprising was being plotted against Honduran president Miguel Dávila, promoted by General Manuel Bonilla—former president of Honduras—and his adventure partner Samuel Zemurray, recognized banana trader.

Among the group of partygoers in the brothel were: Honduran General Manuel Bonilla, his mentor Zemurray, Lee Christmas, a mercenary who had previously participated in the constant skirmishes happening in Central American republics, and Guy "Machine Gun" Molony, a veteran of the Boer War in South Africa. The agents in charge of monitoring the activities of the alleged conspirators did not realize when the latter snuck out of the brothel to embark on the Hornet; a ship purchased with funds from Zemurray, who also equipped Bonilla with an army of US mercenaries under Lee Christmas's command and abundant ammunition.

A profile published by US newspaper *The New York Times* on December 24, 1910 notes the departure of the Hornet from the New Orleans port, and its "distinguished" crew, armed to the teeth. The newspaper emphasized that telephone lines between New Orleans and Port Eads—located at the mouth of the Mississippi River in Louisiana—mysteriously stopped working, without chance of stopping the Hornet from moving downriver and taking course toward the Gulf of Honduras.

Of Cabbages and Kings

"In the constitution of this small, maritime banana republic was a forgotten section." That phrase, included in a series of stories published by North American writer O. Henry in 1904, coined the term "banana republic," which described servile governments predisposed to allow agricultural exploitation through large-scale monoculture plantations.

Seven years after the printing of O. Henry's stories, Honduras was enshrined as the "model" banana republic, with Sam Zemurray as its father at the time. Zemurray was architect not only of the invasion of Honduras but also the bloody 1954 coup in Guatemala against the legitimate government of Jacobo Arbenz. Guatemalan President Arbenz had expropriated a portion of idle lands from the United Fruit Company, which Zemurray had taken over through a kind of coup against its shareholders in 1933—after which he came to head the company's board of directors.

One of the greatest benefits Zemurray achieved was abolition of the tax on bananas, as well as acquiring land concessions that swelled the company's existing holdings on the Cuyamel River basin. Mercenary Lee Christmas became head of General Bonilla's

armed forces, becoming the first US citizen to hold that office in Honduras.

African oil palm plantations irrigated with blood

During General Manuel Bonilla's term, a good part of the northern coast of Honduras was handed over to the Cuyamel Fruit Company—a company owned by Sam Zemurray. This company was then bought by US-based United Fruit Company, which in turn merged with the company AMK to form the United Brands Company. By 1929, the United Brands Company had imported different varieties of African oil palm seeds to Honduras, which were planted in the Lancetilla Botanic Garden in the city of Tela. Later in 1938, the first plantation on the Birichicheen ranch in El Progreso was established, and in 1943 the San Alejo plantation was established, and still exists today.

During the military dictatorship of López Arellano in the early 1970s, oil palm plantations were of vital importance in the so-called land reform. Peasant cooperatives were established in the Aguán valley and thrived until, with the counter-reform of the 1990s introduced under Rafael Callejas' administration, many were pressured to sell their plantations at bargain prices. It was at that moment that businessman Miguel Facusse—known as the "palm grower of death"—appropriated a large part of the Aguán Valley.

After the 2009 coup, peasant farmer groups began a process of recovering the plantations that Facusse had encroached, a situation which has led to a low-intensity war, with a count of over a hundred peasants murdered in the last seven years.

"Model Cities" and Neocolonialism in the 21st Century

In 2011, the administration of Porfirio Lobo—resulting from fraudulent elections held months after the 2009 coup—approved constitutional reforms that paved the way for the "model cities."

The so-called "model cities" are attributed to US ideologist and economist Paul Romer, who tried to implement them in Madagascar. However, a coup cut short his plans. This was in response to the attempt to hand over 100 thousand hectares of land on the island to Korean company DAEWOO (subsidiary of the transnational company POSCO) in order to plant African oil palm.”

After the Madagascar fiasco, Romer sold his idea of "model cities" to the Lobo administration in Honduras. Unlike the over 3000 "special economic development zones" (SEZ) that exist on the planet, the "model cities" have the incentive of outsourcing the application of justice and security, making possible quasi-independent states that thus go unpunished by national laws.

By October 2012, the Special Development Regions Law, legal framework for the "model cities," was declared unconstitutional, leading to the legislative power's coup of the judiciary, thereby exacerbating the effects of the 2009 coup. The National Congress reintroduced "model cities" months later under the name 'Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEED),' which were again approved instantly.

"Model cities" have been promoted abroad among the circuit of right-wing libertarians.

Attracted by the potential outsourcing of justice in order to enjoy a kind of legal tabula rasa, these cities would incentivize the exploration of "plantations of the future," where biotechnological, medical and other production will be implemented, as well as tax havens.

In the midst of all this, Garifuna community lands in Honduras have been included as a possible site on which to build empires of wealth in the sea of poverty in which we survive. Meanwhile, Honduras continues to be the banana republic that O. Henry described at the beginning of the 20th century, and the monoculture plantation model that Zemurray imposed has come back under Paul Romer's futuristic scheme. Once again, the local population is nothing more than disposable manual labor that benefits transnational corporations and the floating islands (cities created in the oceans free of state governance), promoted by Peter Thiel and his anarcho capitalists.

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The Extractive Mining Model: A Potential Threat to Biological Diversity in Mesoamerica

*By MovimientoM4**

Without a doubt, implementation of the extractive industries model as part of governments' "development" option counteracts existing international and regional efforts to buffer the climate and environmental crisis. With cynicism and deceit, they violate the most basic international treaties and agreements that aim to minimally stop the destruction of the environment and biological diversity.

The extractive mining model is undoubtedly **the mega-project with the biggest territorial impact.** It steamrolls human rights and the products nature provides, encourages grabbing and dispossession of land, and is therefore a "natural" promoter of the destruction of Mother Earth.

Mesoamerica stands out globally for its huge biological and cultural diversity, not only for its ancient pre-Columbian history. Its location near the equator creates unique conditions that produce a wealth of natural products and water reserves, and makes it home to native endemic and endangered species not found in any other part of the planet. Its mountainous regions stand out, including the Sierra Madre in Mexico (West and East) which spans a large part of the country; the Cuchumatanes mountains in Guatemala; and the Central Volcanic and Talamanca ranges in Costa Rica and Panama. Here, in these mountains life is diverse, nature is multi-faceted, and Mesoamerican peoples have contributed to their management and domestication of native species to establish historic bio-cultural processes. All of this means biodiversity.

The wealth of biodiversity in Mesoamerica is threatened by neoliberal integrationist projects, like the "Plan Puebla-Panamá"—now called "Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project"—and other commercial integration projects which are nothing more than companies' and multinational actors' plans to commodify nature at any cost. The "Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project" aims to progressively create the ideal conditions to facilitate private national, foreign and multinational investment. It is therefore no coincidence that there is talk of large infrastructure projects—like highways, railways, airports and seaports—as well as increased energy production through mega-dam substations or wind farms. Without these infrastructure, communication, and energy projects, investments would simply freeze, and companies would not come or be able to operate. Additionally, large amounts of natural goods—like water—are needed, which in some cases like mining projects, are essential for their establishment and operation. It is therefore no coincidence that the energy integration system involves homogenizing the region's transmission lines . Meanwhile, each country moves to deregulate its laws and regulations, to later create new ones that accommodate the business sector. (1)

The impacts of deregulation are multi-faceted, yet one only needs to observe the thousands of mining concessions associated with energy projects—authorized arbitrarily by governments and directly threatening this land—to get an idea of what we're talking about.

In this context, the destructive mining projects of Canadian company GoldCorp—such as the Marlin Mine in Guatemala, the San Martín Mine in Valle de Siria, Honduras, or the Los Filos mining complex in Carrizalillo, Mexico—clearly demonstrate how opencast mining epitomizes the devastation caused by the extractive model. In these countries, opencast mining has contaminated rivers through a leaching process (the use of sodium cyanide to extract minerals like gold, silver and copper) and has caused major environmental liabilities through use of toxic heavy metals, which cause irreversible damage to the health of people, animals and the environment.

Nonetheless, and despite the huge efforts of financial institutions, governments and mining corporations to make people believe mining is the only way to develop, people have built diverse forms of resistance to stop the expansion of mining and demystify the discourse of "progress and development" that the extractive model promotes and imposes. They have achieved this through peaceful, democratic and legal processes, with a strong basis in their self-determination.

The dominant economic model is voracious and mercantilist when it comes to nature, which it defines as "strategic" (water, minerals, air, land). This extractive model seeks to reduce nature's significance to the point where a forest is seen only as a producer of wood and energy sources, and a mountain as a collection of minerals and precious metals. From this standpoint, the vision of ecosystems as a whole is lost. Meanwhile, indigenous peoples have historically seen nature as a whole, in which forests, rivers and all of Mother Earth are inter-connected. Their worldview connects the earthly with the otherworldly, and is the essence of life itself. It is no coincidence therefore, that in the face of the predatory extractive model, resistance movements respond in defense of life itself, to guarantee the continued existence of the great natural wealth that still remains in the region.

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http://movimientom4.org/2016/06/quien-gobierna-ahora-son-las-corporaciones-transnacionales-gustavo-castro/

Defending the body-earth territory: an alternative for social movements in resistance (1)

The Rancho Grande municipality in northern Nicaragua is facing installation of an open-pit gold mine by Canadian company B2Gold. With over 80% of the population against the mine, the *Yaoska Guardians Movement*—made up of women and men from the communities—led the protests and denunciations that paralyzed the project. The threat is still present, as the company has seven other concessions in the municipality.

The Nicaraguan government has presented open-pit mining and other mega-projects that exploit nature (so named for their large size), as a strategy to reduce poverty. However, the economic, social and environmental impacts on the population and territories where they are installed are very negative. Women are especially jeopardized, through impacts on their economic activities, health and participation in decision-making; and through gender violence.

The struggle to defend land is inseparable from the struggle to defend women's bodies—the first territory to free in an exploitative system. It is necessary to defend the right to make decisions about territory, bodies and life in a more integrated fashion. Only by uniting these struggles can they resist and create alternatives to transform the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial system. (2)

Defending Land/territory for Life

Territory is not only a physical space: forests, mountains and rivers; it has a deeper meaning. It is where relationships among humans, and with the environment (animals, plants) occur; it is the rocks and minerals that sustain it, and the surrounding air that enables all these forms of life. It is also history, memory and culture, and the roots and spirituality that form the worldview of each people. Territory is where individual and collective identities are constructed. Therefore, to defend territory is to defend the forms of life that inhabit it.

Feminist economics (3) considers that life is based on two principles: interdependence (the need for human relationships) and ecodependence (the relationship with the

environment where we live). Interdependence in a territory can be expressed through relationships of solidarity, respect and reciprocity; but also through relationships of inequality and exploitation between men and women because of the patriarchy in which we live, which generates discrimination, oppression and violence.

Ecodependence is the relationship with nature. In the current system, companies exploit and plunder nature for profit. This causes serious effects and impacts on the lives of communities, for which companies and States rarely take responsibility.

How can life continue in a system that attacks it, and places capital accumulation over the lives of people and nature? (4) It continues only thanks to women's caregiving work in homes. (5) It is women's bodies that fight to ensure the sustainability of life, in any circumstance and against all odds. Faced with a threat like the installation of a mining project, defending territory becomes a struggle to defend life itself.

But, what life do we want to defend? One where inequality exists and women do not have the same opportunities as men? Where our bodies and sexuality are controlled? One where nature is degraded or plundered to benefit the interests of a small group of people over the majority of the population?

In order to defend a good life where we can be happy, the struggle must mend the injustice of the system itself, in joint defense of land and bodies. Otherwise, territorial defense is only partial and helps uphold inequalities.

The First Territory to Defend is Women's Bodies

Community feminists from Bolivia and Guatemala identify patriarchy as the system of all oppression, exploitation, violence and discrimination in humanity and nature, which historically has been built on women's bodies. (6) That is, the domination of women is the same domination that exploits nature; it is a relationship of inequality also present in the oppressions of particular groups of people: racism, sexism, colonialism...From this perspective, both land and women's bodies are seen as expendable territories to be conquered.

Feminist movements against extractive projects have constructed a new political imaginary and struggle, focused on women's bodies as the first territory to defend. (7) The body has become the first frontier, the place from which—first individually and later collectively—we defend what is most sacred: individual and community life, knowledge, identity and memory. Interwoven with this resistance is the defense of territory-earth, because "we cannot talk about happy and emancipated bodies, while nature is highly oppressed and exploited. The liberation of bodies comes through the liberation of the earth." (8)

Community Resistance to Mining in Rancho Grande

The Yaoksa Guardians Movement emerged in 2003 as an organization of women and men from 38 communities in Rancho Grande, who were concerned about the threat of mining in their territory. They question the alleged "development" that mining promises, as they have seen how mining in other towns in Nicaragua has increased inequality instead of reducing poverty levels.

Defending territory in this municipality is not only a matter of respect for the environment. It is a matter of defending their way of life, which is deeply rooted in the land and in community, in which mutual care still exists, as well as the value of the collective over the individual. Nonetheless, as part of a patriarchal society, great inequality between women and men also exists.

The women of Rancho Grande participate in the social base of Yaoska Guardians and as leaders in decision-making spaces, with the ability to mobilize other women. Diverse community expressions to reject large extractive projects—such as mining, the interoceanic canal, dams, monocultures like sugarcane, etc—are emerging forcefully in Nicaragua. Many of these movements are led by women, who are gaining greater prominence and visibility, and who understand that they are the most affected.

Impacts on Women

Where there is mining it becomes the main economic activity, and non-commercial and collective practices are de-valued—these being mainly carried out by women, who have less presence in the formal economy. The alterations mining causes in ecosystems and water sources burden women, who are traditionally responsible for ensuring the food and health of their families.

Meanwhile, mining offers women jobs as maids, cooks, washers and gardeners; whereas men are offered more prestigious and better paid jobs. This promotes sexual division of labor (9) and deepens relationships of domination of men over women.

Furthermore, in most mining locations there are increased reports of sexual violence and abuse by men who come from outside the area, who feel entitled to invade the territory and the bodies of women.

All kinds of violence accompany extractive projects. In Rancho Grande, authorities have tried to impose mining against people's wishes. The army and police protect foreign investment and repress any protest by the people. With total impunity, company personnel and government officials have threatened and physically and verbally abused several women and men of the Yaoska Guardians Movement for their positions against mining. This is state subservience to capital interests (10), and is characteristic of extractive industry activities.

An Alternative: Uniting Struggles

The success of the mining project cancellation in Rancho Grande is due, in part, to the alliance of social—including feminist—organizations. The Movement understands that the territory they are defending cannot be filled with relationships of inequality, because this also weakens the community and causes ruptures in it. The rebellion gets its strength from defending a good and happy life for all, with free bodies living in harmony with each other and with nature.

The Nicaraguan Government proposes development and poverty reduction through extractive industries, capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal and anthropocentric projects (11),

which harm our bodies, threaten our freedom, destroy our land and impoverish most of the population in order to benefit foreign companies. This constitutes a direct attack on life. Only by uniting the struggles of social movements defending territory-body with those defending territory-land, can both possibly resist and continue building good alternatives that allow us to enjoy life with justice and equality.

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(1) The original article was published by the Venancia Group: *"Mujeres que sostienen la vida: Retos para los feminismos desde la realidad nicaragüense."* Available at: http://grupovenancia.org/mujeres-que-sostienen-la-vida-retos-para-los-feminismos-desde-la-realidad-nicaraguense/
(2) Capitalist, because it is based on private property and individual economic benefit. Patriarchal, because it promotes the superiority of male over female, creating unequal power relationships and men's domination over women. Colonial, because some countries appropriate the lands, wealth and resources of others, through exploitative relationships and with the assumption that not all lives are equal.
(3) Amaia Pérez Orozco (2014). *Subversión feminista de la economía, Ed. Traficantes de sueños-Mapas.*
(4) This is what feminist economics calls the capital-life conflict.
(5) Activities required to meet human needs: food, health, education, housecleaning, affection, and many others. They traditionally and unjustly fall on women, justified in terms of skills, traditions, or in the name of love.
(6) *"Tejiendo historia para sanarnos desde nuestro territorio cuerpo-tierra"*. Amismaxaj (2015).
(7) Miriam Gartor (2014). *El feminismo reactiva la lucha contra el extractivismo en AL*. http://www.lamarea.com/2014/02/17/ecuador-extractivismo-mujeres
(8) Interview with Lorena Cabnal, Amismajax, Guatemala.
(9) Unjust organization of labor that assigns women the least valued jobs and men the most recognized ones.
(10) Julieta Paredes, (2008). *"Hilando fino desde el feminismo comunitario"*. Ed. Independent Feminist Socialist Lesbians
(11) We say anthropocentric when we place human beings at the center, ignoring the other forms of life on which we depend for survival

Semuc Champey, Guatemala: Where the River Hides

They are not invaders, they named this territory

It was the indigenous Maya Q'eqchi communities that named this magical place in the forest, "Semuc Champey," which in Spanish means "the river that hides in the mountain." This is also the name by which it was registered with the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP, by its Spanish acronym). This happened without consulting the communities that inhabited and cared for these lands long before the idea of protected areas existed, and before it was declared a Natural Monument in 2005.

The Natural Monument management category honors the scenic beauty of the place; but unfortunately since its inception, it has excluded indigenous communities from the conservation model. This became clear in August 2016, when government authorities brutally evicted communities, adding to a series of historical violations of their rights and dispossession of their lands by landowners and the government.

Today, CONAP unjustly calls the communities that inhabit Semuc Champey invaders, even though these communities have been living in the area for hundreds of years, and are demanding the right to manage their land. Instead of being protagonists in the area's management, communities are treated as spectators in the process and receive few benefits; meanwhile they watch "development" bring income to hotels, foreigners, travel agencies and to CONAP itself. After eleven years, their living conditions have not improved, in spite of living in this beautiful land.

CONAP's attitude is questionable, to say the least. This case shows how in its 27+ years of existence, the institution has evolved little in its vision of managing the country's protected areas. To meet its goal of "protecting biodiversity," CONAP should prioritize the participation of local communities living near or within the protected areas, and not see or label them as enemies of conservation.

Historical Background of the Q'eqchi' Peoples of Lanquín Semuc Champey

For several centuries, these lands belonged to Q'eqchi grandfathers and grandmothers. Much later, a German arrived and occupied the lands, then abandoned them during the

government of Jorge Ubico in the 1940s. The estate as a whole was called Actelá. During the German *finquero's* time on these lands, our grandparents and parents were used as low-level laborers, working without pay in exchange for not having their homes removed from the estate.

After the farmer left, indigenous peoples organized to manage the lands. Years later, some cooperatives obtained titles to their lands; one of these was the Actelá cooperative.

During this time, community members cared for the land, planting beautiful trees and taking care of the animals that inhabited the area, which today is known as Semuc Champey.

Around 2000, a mayor from a nearby municipality became interested in supporting the community to buy the lands from the Actelá Cooperative. The community approved the idea, and the land was purchased for Q 375,000 (about US $50,000) and officially titled "Chicanus y Santa María." In communal agreement, they improved the care of the Semuc Champey area.

The elders at that time, who trusted the mayor, decided that the municipality would coordinate with the communities to manage the two most beautiful areas of the land (Semuc Champey). It was on this understanding that they transferred the management of those two areas to the municipality. They did not think that over the course of the years, their land would be completely taken away from them.

At this time, a member of the national Congress presented a new bill (25-2005) to declare Semuc Champey a protected area, without consulting the communities or the mayor. This violated the Republic's Constitution, which guarantees indigenous peoples the right to their territories. It also violated international conventions, considering that Convention 169 of the ILO—which establishes the right to Free, Prior, Informed Consent—was already in force. The municipal code was not followed either, and it was a violation of municipal autonomy; in fact, the mayor didn't even know!

Eight days before it was approved, the mayor was notified that Congress would be approving the bill. Two days after its approval, the mayor filed an appeal, which was not validated, and Decree 25-2005 came into effect.

In 2005, Semuc Champey was declared a protected area under the Natural Monument category. The law assigned CONAP as area administrator, automatically excluding the municipality and communities from territorial management. Communities demanded the right to manage their lands; since part of their territory had been snatched away from them without warning. CONAP later negotiated with the Q'eqchi communities to give them management rights, in exchange for development projects. They reached an agreement in which 60% of park revenues would go to CONAP, 10% to the municipality and 30% to the community; and there would be work for families.

Over the years, the established agreement has not been fulfilled. In July 2015, authorities from Catastro (RIC) and CONAP came to survey lands, with the intention of expanding the area of Semuc Champey Park. This increase (of 119 hectares) encroaches on the territory where communities live.

That day we asked CONAP and RIC to leave. We asked them to sign an agreement, in which we stated our objection to them surveying our lands and making decisions about our territory; and we demanded that they leave.

From that moment on, the communities once again took over management and administration of Semuc Park, since CONAP had failed to deliver on its commitments, and the municipality had disrespected the communities by not engaging in dialogue.

A Q'eqchi leader said: "*na' qaj naq te' suqesi chaq li q'a ch'och*" (since CONAP took our lands, and the municipality snatched them away without dialogue, we want our lands back).

"*Li qa maak sa' ru eb' ahan ix b'anaq in k'a ix q'a kanab'eb' ix b'isb'al li ch'och' ut naq in k'a ix q'a kanab' naq te oq' sa chijunil li q'a na'jej*" (according to CONAP and the municipality, our sin was not letting them take the additional 119 hectares to expand the Park and divide up the land).

Park Management in the Hands of Communities

During their administration, the four Q'qechi communities living in the area organized. Every week, 52 people looked after Semuc Champey Park, including women, the elderly and youth. Every family had work to do, such as weeding and picking up garbage, and a community rescue group organized to assist visitors. Of course, because some people had secure jobs with CONAP, attempts were made to discredit our image and the work we were doing.

"*Ixq'a kut' ix xutan laj CONAP, ix q'a kut' naq lao laj ral ch'och na ko trabajik chi chab'il chiru heb' a an"* (52 people work every week. We are putting CONAP to shame by showing them that the children of the earth manage the park better).

We used incoming funds to pay each worker's time, and we cleaned and repaired the road, filling the potholes.

"If we need to do the accounting we will; we have the paperwork to back us. It was easier for CONAP and the authorities to hold us at gunpoint and threaten our lives, because they did not want dialogue. They know that if we initiate legal proceedings we will win and they will lose. What is valid for us are the native people, indigenous authority, and the Q'eqchi community's own indigenous legal system," expressed a Q'eqchi community leader.

On March 4, 2016, seven indigenous leaders were arrested on charges of usurpation, coercion and aggravated theft. The community showed there was no evidence of these crimes, and they were released shortly afterwards.

Eviction

Early in the morning on July 4, 2016, sixty riot police and National Police officers (PNC, by its Spanish acronym) showed up to evict the inhabitants of Semuc Champey. The communities resisted and asked the authorities to leave, but in the resistance two young people were injured. The women, who had placed themselves on the frontlines,

got upset and fainted in fear as they started to flee, while police threw tear gas and fired into the air.

The police did not achieve their purpose that day. The next day at 6:00 am, "125 riot police and more than 300 PNC police officers returned unexpectedly to evict the communities of Santa María Semuc Champey, Chi Q'anus, Semil and Chisub'in in Semuc Champey, Lanquín Alta Verapaz. Upon arrival they began shooting, from 6:00 to 8:00 am, as if we were at war again. The animals, frightened, were screaming; and people were running everywhere. Most people from the Santa María Semuc Champey community took refuge in the forest to protect themselves. They talk about not polluting the environment. They say they protect the lives of living beings. So why so much pollution with their guns? Why do they threaten our lives? They may have hit animals with their gunfire—we don't know."

They are now coming into homes in the communities, repressing Q'eqchi families through excessive force and violence, and invading their lands. These families are unarmed and fear for their lives.

There is also a media campaign against the communities, claiming they are inciting violence, when it is the police who have used excessive force and lethal weapons against unarmed villagers. The communities have always preferred dialogue, but local CONAP staff did not take them seriously, and today the police are perpetrating state violence. The communities explain that they are not invaders and are within their property.

Local, native and indigenous communities have proven faithful guardians of their territory and of nature, from the forests of Totonicapán and Palin, to the mangroves of the southern coast, to mention just a few examples. Without local communities' contributions and work, CONAP could not guarantee the conservation and protection of the Guatemalan System of Protected Areas. Through its actions against Q'eqchi communities in Semuc Champey, CONAP is clearly taking a step backwards in the collective management of protected areas, and is violating indigenous peoples' rights to their territories.

Meanwhile, as communities fight for their territories in Semuc Champey Park, government institutions are approving studies to exploit the Cahabón river, to favor private interests.

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TRICKS AND DECEPTION THAT PROMOTE LAND GRABBING

REDD+ in Central America: it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission

This text is an initial attempt to understand the dynamics of development and implementation of REDD+ projects in Central America (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), by exploring patterns or similarities in each country, and the role of various international cooperation agencies and non-governmental organizations. REDD+ is promoted in the region mainly by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, donor agencies from northern countries and international NGOs, as a crucial mechanism in the fight against deforestation and climate change. However, its implementation reveals a different reality.

Guatemala stands out among the Central American countries with the government carrying out national REDD+ implementation processes in partnership with cooperation institutions. The largest and most expensive process in Central America is happening in this country. The history of REDD+ in Guatemala starts in 2009, when the World Bank fund to promote this mechanism, the Forest Carbon Partnership Fund (FCPF) (1) donated US $200,000 to Guatemala to develop a National REDD+ Preparation Proposal (R-PP). This document was approved in 2011, and the FCPF immediately disbursed another donation in the amount of US $3.6 million to the Guatemalan government. Additionally, and importantly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) donated US $5 million and US $44 million, respectively. In April 2014, the Guatemalan government received even more money when it signed the technical cooperation agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), an entity that operates as an FCPF implementing partner. Guatemala obtained US $250 million from the IDB.

Guatemala has committed to reduce twelve million tons of CO_2 (carbon dioxide), over half of which the Guate-Carbon project aims to "absorb." Each ton of carbon "absorbed" can be sold to companies or countries that are polluting elsewhere. This project covers the largest contiguous forest region of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, in the state of

Petén. However, industrial oil palm plantations continue to expand next to REDD+ projects in Petén (2). It is important to stress that Guatemala is one of the first experimental laboratories for ecosystem service offset projects. In 1998, the US energy company *Applied Energy Services* (AES) signed an agreement with the NGO CARE to invest in forest conservation projects in the highlands; the project would "offset" emissions from the construction of a 183-megawatt coal-fired power plant in the United States (3).

Another major enterprise of this kind in Guatemala is the REDD+ project "Forests for Life" in the Sierra del Lacandón which covers 202,865 hectares and is funded by the European Union and the German government through its International Climate Initiative. Its proponents intend to sell credits from this project on the voluntary carbon market or other carbon offset schemes.

At the same time that this staggering REDD+ investment is happening, there have been complaints about the Archila family's influence within the Guatemalan Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, in particular regarding layoffs of half of the staff of the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP, for its acronym in Spanish). The Archila family has large investments in the Guatemalan extractive industry, (4) revealing the true interests behind organizational and political conservation decisions: such decisions should in no way affect mega-projects that dispossess lands.

While REDD+ implementation has perhaps been slowest in **Honduras**, according to official data, the government of Porfirio Lobo (heir of the 2009 coup) has nonetheless publicly stated support for its implementation. This is despite opposition from community organizations, who denounce the lack of spaces for free, prior and informed consultation on this process. This is no novelty, given that from 2003-2004 the Honduran government approved the Property Law with support from the World Bank. The Honduran Black Fraternal Organization (OFRANEH, for its acronym in Spanish) denounced that this law was harmful to indigenous communities and lands and violated the right to consent stipulated in ILO Convention 169. This law paved the way to implement REDD+, seeing as it violates the collective nature of property by promoting dissolution of the communal land ownership system.

According to data from the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests, 760,000 hectares of Honduran Mosquitia lands have been titled (5). These lands were previously communally managed, yet now communities must obtain titles for them as cooperatives or private associations in order to access REDD+ funds. This has created an accelerated process of land privatization, driven by the perverse incentive of offset mechanisms.

In the case of **Nicaragua**, there is emphasis on the largest forest region in the country, located in the Autonomous Regions of the Northern and Southern Caribbean Coast (RACCNS). This region is home to over 67% of the forests in the country, as well as Miskita, Mayangna Ulwa, Rama, Garífuna and Creole peoples. Overall, there are over 600,000 people in the RACCNS region, and the region represents 27% of the Nicaraguan territory. The World Bank's FCPF has invested a total of US $3.6 million to elaborate the national emissions' scenarios and reference levels (quantification of emissions) the design of a forest monitoring system; the implementation of a system to monitor, report on and verify CO_2 emissions; and the ongoing consultation processes and environmental and social strategy review (6). Despite all this, there has been no

confirmation of a broad informative and consultation process with forest populations in the RACCNS region.

As for **Costa Rica**, REDD+ implementation has been led by Fonafifo (the organization that administers the Payment for Ecosystem Services system), and funded by German International Cooperation (GIZ), the United Nations REDD Programme (UN-REDD), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and mostly by the World Bank's FCPF. Additionally, Costa Rica received US $1.1 million for its national indigenous peoples consultation plan. Overall, funds for the REDD+ strategy in Costa Rica are estimated at US $12.5 million.

Implementing REDD+ in Costa Rica has been particularly controversial, however, due to the violations of indigenous peoples' rights to free, prior and informed consent under ILO Convention 169. On several occasions, indigenous organizations have reiterated the need for real dialogue on REDD+ implementation in their territories. In October 2015, about 400 indigenous people demonstrated at the Presidential House to make known their rejection of REDD+. Unfortunately, their demands for transparent consultation were not heard. In February 2016, the government considered the pre-consultation phase with indigenous peoples to be complete, claiming that 95% of the consultation plan had been implemented. In response, on July 1st, approximately 400 people were present at the Indigenous Bribri Territory Development Association (ADITIBRI) in Suretka, for the public Declaration of the Bribri Territory of Talamanca Free of REDD+ (7).

The proposed REDD+ national strategy in **El Salvador** is to prioritize Increased Forest Carbon Stocks, mainly by transforming subsistence agricultural practices. It also encourages emissions reductions through existing forest ecosystems in the country (mangroves, other natural forests and agroforestry systems like shade-grown coffee plantations) through REDD+ projects.

El Salvador receives funding from the FCPF, with the World Bank acting as trustee. The Climate Change Committee of the National System of Environmental Management (SINAMA, for its acronym in Spanish), established in 2012, acts as the governing body for the REDD+ Strategy. That same year, the document containing El Salvador's National REDD+ Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) was also drawn up.

But doubts and discontent quickly arose. In May 2012, 23 indigenous organizations and communities of the National Salvadoran Indigenous Coordination Council signed a letter to the World Bank FCPF Coordinator at the time, Benoit Bosquet, demanding rejection of the R-PP that the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources had sent to initiate REDD+ projects. This letter states rejection of the R-PP because "its design neither considers nor incorporates the concerns or needs of El Salvador's indigenous peoples, in terms of impact and adaptation to climate change; and the process to prepare it did not include free, prior and informed consultation with such peoples, according to international indigenous law." (8)

Finally, the violation of indigenous peoples' rights in **Panama** is not very different from the rest of the region. There are serious complaints about the right of access to information regarding REDD+ implementation. Since 2008, when the National Council of Indigenous Peoples in Panama (COONAPIP, for its acronym in Spanish)— an entity

promoting the REDD+ strategy and approach—began alleged consultation workshops, there has been serious criticism.

By 2010, UN-REDD had disbursed US $5.3 million to create the National Strategy, with the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) in charge, and with support from German International Cooperation (GIZ) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In 2013, the National Kuna Congress (highest-level organization of the Kuna-Yala indigenous peoples) rejected the REDD+ implementation process in Panama, considering it to be in violation of ILO Convention 169 due to the lack of information and transparency in the process. (9) In 2013, the National Council of Indigenous Peoples in Panama (COONAPIP, for its acronym in Spanish) also pulled out of the REDD+ negotiations because they were denied Free, Prior Informed Consent, for which they filed a complaint to the UN. COONAPIP later agreed to resume dialogue. (10)

REDD+: more violence against forests, territories and communities

After reviewing some of the facts from each country's experience with REDD, we have found some similarities in the processes:

- 44% of Central American forests are within areas inhabited and used by indigenous peoples (11); hence each country has great interest in carrying out REDD+ projects in those territories;
- To date, no country has carried out a broad and transparent consultation process with communities. There have been inadequate informative and consultation processes on REDD implementation with indigenous peoples of the region. To a greater or lesser degree, it is clear that there are conflicts and complaints about the lack of dialogue and representation, about corruption, and about other issues during development and implementation of REDD+ projects;
- Approaches and funding sources are similar. When it comes to REDD+ in this region, some of the names that keep appearing include: the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Fund (FCPF); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); the World Bank (WB); the NGOs Rainforest Alliance, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF); and international cooperation funds from northern countries such as the German International Cooperation (GIZ). It should be noted that some of these international cooperation agencies, regional banks, NGOs and certifying companies have ties to projects that have been denounced for violating the right to consent under ILO Convention 169, and for pushing forward processes that are illegitimate or unknown by the community and local organizations where they operate;
- REDD+ proposals deepen the privatization of forests and territories, since they consider the only value of forests to be their capacity to absorb carbon, which can then be appropriated by private actors or those external to forests. REDD+ means that forests should be managed or kept unaltered from a conservationist standpoint. Consequently, forest-dependent communities cannot use elements from the forests for their traditional uses, and they lose control over their territories;

- Finally, this mechanism does not address the main causes of the climate crisis: the burning of fossil fuels; the model of large-scale production and consumption, which in Central American countries means monoculture (oil palm, sugarcane, pineapple); and other extractive mega-projects that are causing serious problems in the region.

Indeed, the direct problems that arise from not addressing the extractive production model as one of the main causes of climate change, has enabled the mining, forestry, oil, energy and agribusiness industries to continue expanding, with violent and painful costs throughout Central America. Our countries together constitute one of the most dangerous regions for people defending their territories. According to the NGO Global Witness, every 48 hours an activist fighting against the extractive model is killed. In 2015, 12 people in Nicaragua, 10 people in Guatemala and 8 people in Honduras were killed. REDD+ increases violence towards collective land ownership, the forests of Central American communities, and the right to consultation and self-determination of peoples.

Beyond this expansion, we see communities in all countries organizing against and resisting the privatization of lands and the restrictions put on their practices; and they are placing their bodies on the line to protect forests and collective lands and organization.

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(1) The **FCPF** is a climate fund created with donations from 15 countries and administered by the World Bank, which finances REDD+ preparation activities and payment for performance. The FCPF promotes development of systems and policies conducive to REDD+ in countries with tropical and subtropical forests (such as making legal frameworks on forests and land ownership amenable to carbon and other related markets), and it provides payment to them based on their performance in emissions offsets. The FCPF became operational in 2008, and it complements REDD+ negotiations within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), by attempting to demonstrate how REDD+ can be applied at the country level.
(2) *El Programa REDD+ en Guatemala genera diversidad de opiniones y resultados, Mongabay*, March 2016, https://es.mongabay.com/2016/03/el-programa-redd-en-guatemala-genera-diversidad-de-opiniones-y-resultados/
(3) Idem
(4) *Centro de Medios Independientes.* (2016). *La familia Archila detrás de los despidos de Conap*
https://cmiguate.org/la-familia-archila-detras-de-los-despidos-de-conap/
(5) PRISMA (2014). *Mesoamérica a la delantera de los derechos comunitarios: Lecciones para hacer que REDD+ funcione.*http://alianzamesoamericana.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mesoamerica_a_la_delantera_en_derechos_forestales_comunitarios.pdf
(6) PRISMA (2015) *REDD+ Jurisdiccional en Centroamérica: Oportunidades e implicaciones para pueblos indígenas y comunidades forestales*
http://www.prisma.org.sv/uploads/media/REDD_jurisdiccional_CA_.pdf

(7) Bribris: a people never conquered who are standing up to REDD, WRM Newsletter February 2016, http://wrm.org.uy/es/articulos-del-boletin-wrm/seccion1/bribris-un-pueblo-nunca-conquistado-que-le-planta-cara-a-redd/;
Bosques para las comunidades no para el mercado. Miradas críticas sobre REDD, http://wrm.org.uy/es/otra-informacion-relevante/video-bosques-para-las-comunidades-no-para-el-mercado-miradas-criticas-sobre-redd/
(8) Civil society in El Salvador demands more than REDD+ from climate change negotiations. http://www.redd-monitor.org/2013/10/15/civil-society-in-el-salvador-demands-more-than-redd-from-climate-change-negotiations/
(9) *Panamá: ONU REDD viola principios de la propia Declaración sobre Derechos de los PP.II.* https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/88872
(10) Panama's efforts to gain funding for standing forests roiled by indigenous opposition https://news.mongabay.com/2014/09/redd-versus-indigenous-people-why-a-tribe-in-panama-rejected-pay-for-their-carbon-rich-forests/
(11) *Nuevo mapa muestra cómo los pueblos indígenas de Centroamérica ocupan y resguardan gran cantidad de bosques, ríos y aguas costeras.* https://www.iucn.org/node/26161

ACTION ALERTS

Honduras: Murder attempts against the General Coordinator and a community leader of COPINH

The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH, for its Spanish acronym) denounces to the national and international public the murder attempts against Tomás Gomez Membreño, General Coordinator of COPINH and Alexander García Sorto, community leader of Llano Grande, Colomoncagua. " 7 months after the murder of our comrade Berta Cáceres, the lives of those who oppose the construction of projects of death such as the Agua Zarca / DESA dam in the Gualcarque river and the dam of HIDROSIERRA company on the Negro river in the municipality of Colomoncagua continue to be threatened. Read the full statement (in Spanish) here
https://copinh.org/article/alerta-intentos-de-asesinato-contra-el-coordinador/
See also http://copinhenglish.blogspot.com.uy/

Panama: The historic struggle against the Barro Blanco Dam

Ten years after construction started on the Barro Blanco hydroelectric dam in western Panama, members of the indigenous NgäbeBuglé district continue to express their rejection of this project. While the Panamanian government claims the dam will bring development to the community, members of this region argue that the dam is an agent of environmental pollution. Read an article in Spanish about this recent rejection:

https://www.servindi.org/actualidad-noticias/29/09/2016/panama-el-conflicto-historico-de-barro-blanco

Support independent journalism! The Green Economy and its impacts on peoples and territories

In recent decades, many communities have been displaced from their ancestral lands to make way for "Green Economy" mega-projects, or in the name of "nature conservation." In Latin America there has been an increase in the murder rate of environmental activists—mostly indigenous—who have been fighting to stop mega-projects that would destroy their communities and territories. A new platform to report on the relationship between the Green Economy and violations of people's rights is seeking support to research and document cases in Central America and Mexico. You can see the full petition and watch videos in Spanish, English and Portuguese at:
https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/green-economy-social-and-environmental-conflicts-environment#/

Uruguay free of mega-mining!

In December 2013, the Uruguay Free of Mega-mining Movement was formed in order to mobilize the public around the proposal to start open-pit mining in the country. They have carried out many actions through the years to defend the land and natural resources. In October 2016, they are celebrating a big victory: plans for the Zamin Ferrous mining project have been dropped. If there hadn't been such great opposition to the Zamin Ferrous mining project, Uruguay would surely be suffering similar consequences as villages near the same company's mining project in Brazil: abandoned installations, irreparable environmental and social damage, lawsuits, unpaid debts, and dozens of ruined contractors. Even though the threat still exists, this is a victory for the anti-mining movement in Uruguay. Read the full statement in Spanish:
http://www.guayubira.org.uy/2016/08/uruguay-libre-de-megamineria/

RECOMMENDED:

No to REDD+ in El Salvador!

The Climate Change Committee in El Salvador has sent respective notes to the Bonn Challenge Secretariat, the UN-REDD Secretariat, and the Forest Carbon Partnership Fund of the World Bank (FCPF), attaching the "Climate Change Committee's Statement on REDD+ implementation in El Salvador," and expressing deep concern about, and rejection of, REDD+ implementation in the country. The statement calls on the government of El Salvador, involved ministries and local governments to abandon implementation of REDD+ initiatives in the country in all their variations, as well as the approaches, politics and programs that surround them. Read the statement in Spanish here and in English here.
http://wrm.org.uy/es/files/2016/10/Rec_El-Salvador_REDD_EN.pdf

Oil palm plantations severely harm communities and territories in Central America

The high demand for palm oil is leading to the growth of African Palm plantations around the world, including in Central America. These plantations, in turn, are fuelling environmental destruction, the exploitation of agricultural labour, and the displacement of local peasants by companies often financed by development banks. The TV channel TeleSur produced a short video about the impacts of palm oil plantations on peasants and indigenous peoples during a gathering in Washington, DC aimed to speak out against violations of human rights in Central America. You can watch the video (in English) here:
https://grassrootsonline.org/blog/newsblogpalm-oil-plantations-displace-communities-central-america-video-tells-story/

See another video narrated by Saul Paau, a Q'eqchi' Mayan community leader, who describes the environmental and social devastation wrought by the **palm oil industry in Guatemala**, in particular, the 2015 ecocide in the Pasión River and continuous land grabbing by the company REPSA. The narration is in Spanish with English subtitles:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XKXvHrL-GY&app=desktop

You can also watch a video in Spanish on the history and impacts of the **oil palm plantations in Honduras,** produced by the Honduran Black Fraternal Organization (OFRANEH, for its acronym in Spanish) at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LSUABBeR6Q&feature=youtu.be

El Salvador Opens its Doors to Multinational Companies

In September 2015, the second phase of the US government-financed Millennium Fund project came into force (Fomileno II); this project will impact the entire coastal region of El Salvador. Communities in the area have launched a warning call. The program foresees heavy investments in the construction of hotels, and recreational and residential complexes along the coast. This implies the destruction of mangrove forests, and the eviction, land-grabbing, and displacement of families living along beaches and estuaries. An article in "Rebelión" warns us that we cannot talk about Fomilenio without taking into account its deep connection to the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA), against which there is a strong regional resistance. Read the article in Spanish at: http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=212159

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