



PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL
GUATEMALA PROJECT

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Native peoples:

self-organization and resistance to the pandemic and the State's abandonment

“The onset of Coronavirus only made an already complicated historical context worse. The exploitation, repression, agrarian conflict and criminalization suffered by the communities, and exacerbated by the climate crisis, has been worsened by the pandemic.” (Lesbia Artola, Coordinator of the Community Council of the Highlands CCDA - Las Verapaces)

At least half of the population of Guatemala are indigenous peoples.¹ This population experiences the highest percentages of poverty and malnutrition in the country, and suffers from lack of access to basic rights such as health and water.² The repression, exclusion and invisibility which they are subjected to have historical roots that go back to the Spanish invasion, continuing through the formation of the colonial state and to the present day with the establishment of an extractive economic model based on the exploitation of the territories that these peoples inhabit. Their response to this harsh reality has been resistance based on their rich cultural, identity and their diverse cosmovisions, as well as their millennial knowledge, all of which have developed without State recognition.



La resistencia de los Pueblos Indígenas se basa en su rica diversidad cultural, identitaria y cosmogónica, así como en sus conocimientos milenarios.

The impacts of measures to stop the spread of Covid-19

The first case of Covid-19 in Guatemala occurred in mid-March 2020 and immediately prompted the government to implement measures to address the spread of the virus. It is important to note the high vulnerability of indigenous peoples' to the virus, due to the conditions of poverty in which a large part of this population lives. In spite of this, the ancestral authorities have denounced the fact that they were not invited by the government to the meetings it has held with civil society to discuss prevention measures.³ Thus, the living circumstances of indigenous and campesino communities have not been taken into account in the design of these measures, some of which have had a very

negative impact on them. For example, the limited hours of popular markets and transportation between communities, municipalities and departments have strongly affected their livelihoods, since the economy of these families is based primarily on the sale of surplus crops in the municipal capitals.

“The municipality of Cahabón was closed for months, we were unable to access it, which prevented us from selling our products and obtaining other goods. Even though we cultivate products for self-sufficiency in communities across the region, we continue to have the need to buy other products, which were inaccessible to us during the first months of the pandemic” (Pedro Ramírez, land defender and member of the Pacific Resistance of Cahabón).

1 According to the National Population Census of 2018, 43,8% of the Guatemalan population is indigenous (<https://www.censopoblacion.gt/>). However, academics such as the K'iche' anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj emphasize that “censuses provoke an ethnocide because their methodology is not capable to reflect the real diversity existing in this country”; in: Entrevista a [Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, Radio Ocote](#), 03.09.2020.

2 Oxfam, *Entre el suelo y el cielo. Radiografía multidimensional de la desigualdad en Guatemala*, March 2019.

3 Olmstead, G., *Pueblos indígenas: invisibles en la COVID-19*, No-Ficción, Guatemala, 22.06.2020.

At the same time, the programs promoted by the government to deal with the economic impacts of these measures excluded, the mostly indigenous, rural areas which is clearly discriminatory.⁴ One example is the so-called 'Family Bonus', whose beneficiaries were designated based on their electricity receipts, and did not include those who do not have access to an electricity service, i.e., the poorest population located principally in indigenous territories.⁵

With regard to the right to health, the non-recognition of those who practice Mayan medicine as essential personnel, which would have granted them permission to break the curfew, severely limited access to health for many families, in contexts where this is the only resource available because there is no access to public health services.⁶

According to community leaders, however, it appears that the restrictions have not been applied equally. For example, the large companies that are driving mining, hydroelectric and agricultural mono-culture projects, as well as the work on the Inter-Oceanic Corridor, have continued to work despite the fact that many of their permits have expired or are subject to legal actions that prohibit their activities.⁷ Furthermore, in the departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz, the pandemic has been used as a mechanism to increase intimidation, threats and criminalization and has been used by private actors to carry out evictions without any respect for human life.⁸ At the same time, restrictions on mobility and assembly have made it difficult to defend the territories.

With regard to the quarantine measures, it is important to highlight that women have been the most affected. In many cases, the measures have contributed to exacerbating situations of violence, both in their homes and in their communities. In fact, records of sexual violence against women and girls have increased.⁹ In addition, the burden of care for women in their families has also increased without an effective response from the State to these situations.

The community response

Faced with the ineffectiveness and negative impacts of the measures implemented by the State, Guatemala's indigenous peoples have coordinated autonomous and self-managed initiatives aimed at protecting communities from the virus.



Manifestación en frente del Palacio Nacional, Guatemala, 21.11.2020

4 Mirador Indígena COVID-19, *Informe de Observación de Gobiernos Municipales frente a la Pandemia del COVID-19*, Guatemala, August 2020.

5 Gómez, F., Hernández, J., Ochoa Fuentes, L, *Pueblos indígenas en el contexto del covid-19 en Guatemala*, Observatorio Social del Coronavirus. Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO), Guatemala, May 2020.

6 Olmstead, G., Op.Cit..

7 Gómez, F. et al., Op.Cit.

8 For further information on the subject of evictions of indigenous communities during the Covid-19 emergency go to *El derecho a la tierra bajo amenaza en las Verapaces: desalojos en tiempos de COVID-19*, PBI Guatemala, 28.05.2020.

9 Interview, *Lorena Cabnal analiza pandemia de COVID-19 en la Guatemala indígena*, teleSUR, 29.04.2020.

Many communities have implemented health security cordons to control the entry into their territories, as well as the application of disinfection measures for vehicles and people. For their part, community radio stations have played a key role in providing information in Mayan languages and guidance on recommendations for virus prevention, such as handwashing, wearing masks, and keeping physical distance.¹⁰

The role of women, with respect to health care, has been key since the outbreak of the pandemic. They have promoted the reawakening of the immunological memory of the people with the use of medicinal plants and ancestral healing practices based on their cosmovision, always keeping in mind the need to balance physical and mental energies.

“The consumption of processed products is displacing the communities’ nutritional relationship with fruits, tubers, seeds, flowers, buds and leaves. This rich diversity of plants, which is what our peoples eat, strengthens our immunity, helping us respond to the attacks of viruses and bacteria with which we have been living for millions of years. It is important to make our food consumption a political act through the consciousness that links these daily acts with the memory of the plundering that our people have experienced.” (Lorena Cabnal, member of the Tzk’at Network of Ancestral Healers of Community Feminism from Iximulew)

The community organization has also served to confront the economic impacts caused by transportation limitations. In the department of El Quiché, for example, community mayors from different micro regions agreed to organize transportation and commerce. They developed coordinated security measures throughout the area, defining the number of people who could travel and the cargo they could carry, as well as the use of masks and gloves.

Another response to the economic impacts has been the recovery of ancestral practices and customs such as barter, the exchange of products not mediated by money but directed to the satisfaction of basic human needs.

“[Through barter] we managed to obtain products that we did not have access to, such as green beans and radishes, and in exchange we have given onions and tomatoes. We have been able to support our families through the exchange of products.” (Adrián Caal, Poqomchi’ leader of the Union of Peasant Organizations UVOC).

In response to the lack of work and income generation activities caused by government measures, communities

have increased the cultivation of basic family food products such as corn, beans, squash, and herbs. They are supporting families who do not have access to land or the harvest with the products obtained from their gardens.

Vital help has come from some social organizations who have supported the families with bags of food and seeds, even though government measures limited their possibilities of being present in the territories. Together with this humanitarian response, the organizations have strengthened their political work to support the communities and peoples. The Iximulew Campesino Front, composed of the CCDA, the UVOC, the New Day Chorti Campesino Central Coordinator (CCCND) and the United

El 15 de julio
a las 10am CST

ACÉRCATE

a la situación de las herederas de la
sabiduría ancestral maya.

SOBRE CONTEXTO COVID
Conversamos con
Lorena Cabnal y Alex Vásquez,
integrantes de TZ’KAT Red de
Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo
Comunitario Territorial desde Iximulew

abriendo espacios para la paz

pbiguatemalaa
 You Tube Peace Brigades International

Find the video of the virtual program ACÉRCATE in which the Ancestral Healers share tips and remedies to deal with the corona virus on our website: <https://pbi-guatemala.org/es/multimedia/videos>.

10 Hernández Ixcoy, D., *COVID-19 y Pueblos Indígenas*, indigenascovid19.red, Guatemala, 01.10.2020.



Harvest of miltomates, photo: UVOOC

Campesino Committee (CUC)¹¹ has sought a dialogue with the authorities to address concerns such as: the lack of public policies in relation to rural and agrarian development; the dismantling of the institutions constituted by the Peace Accords to address the structural problem of access to land;¹² and the increase in violent attacks on campesino and indigenous communities since the beginning of the pandemic.¹³

With regard to social organization in the territories, communities and organizations have had to reinvent themselves in the face of the

limitations of assembly, in order to continue their work and keep the social fabric alive. They have held smaller meetings (as permitted by law), during which participants have assumed the responsibility for sharing what has been discussed in these spaces with other reduced circles of neighbors, thus building networks for information transmission.

In this context, both in Guatemala and in other regions of the world, the importance of what José Francisco Cali Tzay, a Kaqchikel Maya and UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, has

pointed out is that *“the indigenous communities who can best resist the COVID-19 pandemic are those who have achieved autonomy and self-government, which allows them to manage their lands, territories and resources, and to guarantee food security through their traditional crops and traditional medicine. Now more than ever, governments around the world must support indigenous peoples to implement their own plans to protect their communities and to participate in the development of national initiatives to ensure that they are not discriminated against.”*¹⁴.

11 Frente Campesino Iximulew, *Economía y Agricultura Familiar Indígena y Campesina. Una oportunidad para la población guatemalteca*, Guatemala, 15.04.2020.

12 In July of 2020, president Alejandro Giammattei declared the closure – among other entities – of the Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs (SAA), see: Toro, D., *Giammattei le dio el tiro de gracia a la institucionalidad de la paz*, Prensa Comunitaria, 30.07.2020

13 PBI Guatemala, Op.Cit. Furthermore the Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit (UDEFEQUA) registered 4 assassinations between January and September of 2020. Half of the attacks were committed against indigenous people who defend land and territory.

14 OHCHR, Statement: *“COVID-19 is devastating indigenous communities worldwide, and it's not only about health” – UN expert warns*, 18.05.2020.

UVOC: 40 years of resistance, organization and struggle

in defense of the rights of campesino and indigenous families

2020 marks the 40th anniversary of the Union of Peasant Organizations (UVOC), an organization that PBI has been accompanying since 2005. We will provide a brief historical review of both the achievements and the challenges encountered along the way.

UVOC strives for an Integrated Agrarian Reform, the defense of land and territory and the equitable and balanced development of campesino and indigenous communities.¹ In other words, they focus their struggle on the most important structural problem in Guatemala, access to and control of land and territory, which has deep historical roots that go back to the Spanish invasion. This problem has yet to be solved and remains one of the major causes of poverty and conflict.²

The first steps

The origins of the UVOC date back to 1980, at the height of the internal armed conflict.³ Faced with the situation of extreme poverty which campesino and indigenous families in rural areas of the departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz had to endure, leaders from these communities, particularly people involved with the Catholic Church and others concerned about the situation, met in the municipality of Purulhá (Baja Verapaz), to discuss, develop and implement proposals aimed at



Carlos Morales

addressing the impoverishment and dispossession.

The cooperative *Renacimiento* R.L. thus came out of the union of small cooperatives and community organizations already in existence. Despite the fact that they were forced to carry out their activities clandestinely, due to the war and context of deep repression, the cooperative managed to function and continued to grow for 10 years. It managed to set up a printing room and a carpentry workshop, and offered courses in masonry, baking, cooking, typing, handicrafts and organic agriculture. They also managed to open a store for basic products, a bamboo furniture and construction workshop, and a handicrafts store, where the

textiles made by the women were sold. However, these achievements provoked State repression, leading to persecutions, threats, imprisonment and even murder of campesino leaders and indigenous authorities who were members of the cooperative. The stores and workshops also suffered attacks and were destroyed by the army. However, as the coordinator of UVOC, Carlos Morales, points out, “they destroyed all our material things, but they could not destroy our way of thinking.

The emergence of UVOC

Based on the previous experience of the *Renacimiento* cooperative, small cooperatives, communities and social organizations from the departments of

1 <https://infouvoc.wixsite.com/uvocgt/nosotros>

2 For further information on the history of social struggles in the region, we recommend: PBI Guatemala, *We Defend Life! The Social Struggles in Alta Verapaz*, abril 2020

3 The reconstruction of UVOC’s history is based on an interview with Carlos Morales, coordinator of the organization, held in June of 2020 as well as of information from their website (<https://infouvoc.wixsite.com/uvocgt>) and social media.

Alta and Baja Verapaz began to meet again and formed UVOC on October 8, 1990. UVOC, according to Carlos Morales, “is an umbrella organization that works together, to protect, train, advocate to and win respect from the authorities. It is based on solidarity.” UVOC’s work begins from the organizational vision of the indigenous peoples, in other words, based on their cosmovision and the energies of its members, who form the regional councils which make up the four cardinal points and the Heart Council. These councils are made up of men, women and young people who in turn form UVOC’s general assembly, where the work plans are discussed and approved. In this way they have built “a practice that gradually breaks with western, liberal and racist impositions.”⁴

After the signing of the Peace Accords (December 1996), the work of UVOC continued to gain strength and was extended to the departments of El Quiché and Izabal. They now have a presence in some 20 municipalities across these four departments. The work carried out by UVOC in favor of the communities’ access to land is not risk free, as it impacts the interests of powerful actors, which has meant they have had to endure threats, physical attacks and criminalization. As such, they approached PBI to request international accompaniment in 2005.

Their constant analysis of Guatemala’s agrarian context and problems has led UVOC to identify five areas of focus: defense of land and territory; integrated rural development; food sovereignty and labor rights; organizational strengthening, political and ideological education and technical training; popular communication; and gender equality.

Organizational strengthening is key for UVOC, thus they established a Peasant School for young people, which provides political and technical training for active participation in the management of communities. The popular communication program functions as part of this School and allows young people to collaborate with community radio stations and contribute to the generation and dissemination of information among the campesino communities. The gender equality program seeks to promote the participation of women in decision-making and training spaces, to support the women’s productive processes as well as processes which recognize them as land owners.

Defense of Land and Territory

Given that the agrarian conflict continues to be one of Guatemala’s principal problems, the defense of land and territory is a major focus of UVOC’s work.⁵ As such, the organization provides advice, representation and legal defense to the communities who claim their rights. They also support leaders who experience criminalization and judicialization processes, precisely because they dare to defend their rights. One of the legal struggles they are accompanying is that of the communities who have ancestral rights to the land, because known as *mozos colonos* they were used for generations by plantation “bosses” as a quasi-slave labor.⁶ According to Carlos Morales, “As of today the communities have managed to access, regularize or recover the lands in some 40 estates.”⁷ However, it is not enough to recover the land if they remain without access to services such as roads, running water, health, education or adequate agrarian

policies. It has been a long journey for the communities who have not benefited from state support for concrete policies. For this reason, UVOC’s accompaniment of the communities continues even after they recover their land, providing advice and advocacy with state authorities responsible for agrarian development. Strategic alliances have been created at the national level with other organizations such as the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC), the Community Council of the Highlands (CCDA), and New Day Chorti Campesino Central Coordinator (CCCND), to strengthen this work. They have come together to form the Iximulew Campesino Front. At the international level, UVOC is a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC).

Challenges in the struggle for access to land

- Scarce availability of land for campesino populations as opposed to the large extensions of land which are available for mono-cultures and extractive projects.
- Repression against communities and campesino organizations who support them and criminalization of social protest by actors with interests in land (businessmen, military and politicians). All of this deeply impacts the social fabric of the communities, creating internal divisions.
- Lack of dialogue with government institutions for the implementation of integrated rural development policies. This is further aggravated by the recent closure of the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (SAA), an institution created with the Peace Accords to address agrarian issues.

4 <https://infouvoc.wixsite.com/uvocgt/historia>

5 According to the [informe 2019 de OACNUDH](#), to the date of October 31, 2019, the Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs had registered 1.532 cases of agrarian conflicts, the majority in the departments of Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, Quiché and Izabal. The main disputes are about property rights, territorial limits and land registry.

6 “This figure, similar to the feudal serf, has a colonial origin and established labor relations whereby campesinos who worked on landlords’ estates did not receive a salary, but rather were allowed them to live there and cultivate on the land. In most cases this was a verbal agreement, without the existence of a contract, and that status of mozo colono was passed from generation to generation by custom”. In PBI Guatemala, Op. Cit.

7 Among them, we recollect the PBI accompanied and documented case of the *La Primavera Finca*, in the municipality of San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz: PBI Guatemala, *After 15 years of peaceful struggle, La Primavera Poqomchi’ families recover their ancestral lands*, Annual Report 2015

Integral rural development and food sovereignty

UVOC is committed to implementing organic family agriculture and recovering the ancient knowledge transmitted from generation to generation in the lands recovered by the communities. According to Sandra Calel, coordinator of the organization’s campesino and indigenous women’s group, the historical processes of repression and dispossession experienced by indigenous peoples in Guatemala has “meant the rupture of the process of oral

and practical transmission of ancestral knowledge that had been passed down through generations.”⁸ These were replaced by the impositions of monocultures and the use of chemicals, agro-toxins and pesticides. UVOC is recovering an ancestral ecological agriculture as an effective alternative to feed the population without risking the health of the planet while at the same time preserving biodiversity and local ecosystems. To this end, they are rediscovering the Mayan wisdom of the lunar cycles, the conservation and recovery of native seeds and crop

associations and diversification, with the introduction of new crops such as mushrooms. They propose the use of natural fertilizers, such as chicken manure and worm compost. In the words of Carlos Morales, the UVOC is “working on family and ancestral agriculture⁹ in the Q’eqchi’ and Poqomchi’ communities. We are part of the Decade of Family Farming and in Latin America we are organized in networks so that farmers have greater opportunities in the countryside and rural areas”.

8 Interview with Sandra Calel, July 3, 2020

9 For further information: *Introducing the UN Decade of Family Farming*, FAO, 2020



Recovering the ecological ancestral agriculture, photo: UVOC

The sugar business in Guatemala

Sweet profits for exporters, bitter impacts for communities

The geographic area of Guatemala's Southern Coast includes the departments of Retalhuleu, Suchitepéquez, Escuintla and Santa Rosa. The economy of this area is based primarily on agro-industrial products for export, principally sugar cane and African palm. This extractive economic model requires maximum production within a limited space. That is why it employs methods which are highly polluting, and which have very negative impacts on the health and living conditions of the people. In 2015 the local population organized itself into the Council of Communities of Retalhuleu (CCR) to address this situation. The CCR is made up of 18 communities, the majority of whom come from the municipality of Champerico, who are demanding their right to water, food and health. PBI began to accompany the CCR in April 2020 due to the risks and threats experienced by its members.

Primary countries for Guatemalan sugar in 2019
(Figures in metric tonne)

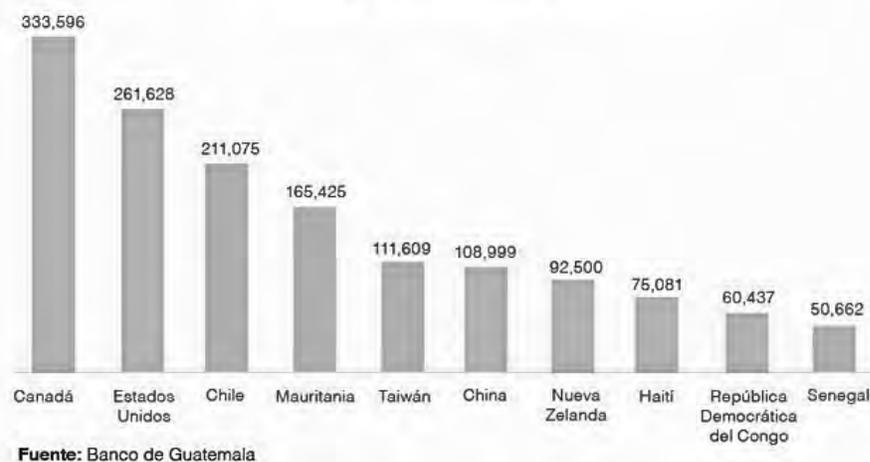


Imagen taken from the website of the Guatemalan Sugar Association – ASAZGUA, www.azucar.com.gt

Land use on the Southern Coast: from subsistence family farming to the agro-export model

Sugar has been one of Guatemala's main export products since the late 1950s. Last year, this product and its derivatives were the country's second most exported product (70% of what was produced was destined for export). Worldwide, Guatemala is the fourth largest exporter of sugar, with the third highest rate of productivity.¹ There are currently 13 sugar mills operating in the country, most of which are located on the Southern Coast. The families that own these mills form an integral part of Guatemala's agro-industrial elite; they also participate in the energy matrix, the

financial system and the political system, and thus hold considerable power.²

A report on the subject, prepared by Andrés Cabanas,³ points out that following the signing of the Peace Accords (and particularly since the beginning of the new century) there has been an exponential increase in sugarcane cultivation at the national level, a trend that has also materialized on the Southern Coast. For the communities in the area, this has meant an accelerated process in the transformation of land use, with profound impacts on the lives of those populations. Local landlords, who own the majority of the land,⁴ have transferred the rental of their plots from campesino families to the sugar mills,

1 Dates from the Asociación de Azucareros de Guatemala (ASAZGUA): <https://bit.ly/33k8IB0>.

2 For more information on the role of the families who possess the biggest sugar mills in the country, see: Solano, L., *Las familias azucareras emergentes*, CMI Guatemala, 10.04.2016; Labrador, G., Villagrán X., Sánchez R. y Alvarado, J., *El cartel del azúcar de Guatemala*, El Faro, 25.04.2017.

3 Cabanas, A., *Intereses económicos y políticos presentes en comunidades de Costa Sur y su impacto en los derechos de la población y la criminalización*, Guatemala, 2019. (Expert's report for the Human Rights Firm for Indigenous Peoples, unpublished).

4 In the municipality of Champerico, 1.510 owners possess 16% of the agricultural land, while 53 land owners control 84% (Ibidem).



In April 2016, the March for Water (*Marcha por el Agua*) called attention on the recuperation of the river basin, the reparation of the damages done to the environment and the peoples as well as for the necessity of a law to regulate the water use, Guatemala, 22.04.2016

who pay higher prices and rent for longer periods. As such, the availability of land to campesino families has been decreasing: the cultivation of sugar cane went from 188,000 hectares in 2003 to 278,900 hectares in 2014 (across the national territory). Currently, more than 60% of the arable land in the department of Escuintla is dedicated to the cultivation of sugarcane, a figure that rises to more than 85% in the municipality of Champerico.⁵

Violations of the rights to water, food and health

Sugarcane production uses large amounts of water, which impacts the

availability of this basic resource for local consumption. Land studies⁶ have shown that the mills use any and every means to guarantee their water supply, including diverting rivers and drilling wells for which they have not carried out adequate environmental impact studies. Furthermore, the need for land for the massive cultivation of sugar cane has led to the immoderate felling of trees and consequent deforestation, not only of the land used for planting, but also of the forests along the riverbanks, which has strongly contributed to the drying up of the rivers in the area, the loss of biodiversity and climate change.⁷

“Champerico has been declared a dry corridor, but it is a corridor that has been dried up by agro-industry which diverts the rivers using dams and quintals. There are farms that make very deep wells with a very large extraction capacity that affect the water table and family wells.” (Abelino Mejía Cancino, member of the CCR).⁸

The excessive use of water for monocultures causes droughts in the summer and flooding of family crops in the winter, when the mills release excess water from the dams, affecting the production of basic grains and the right to food for these families. Likewise, the expansion of sugarcane causes the

5 Facts extracted from the participants of the [Foro Virtual: Comunidades en defensa del agua en la costa sur de Guatemala](#), published on September 24 of 2020 on the Facebook page Muestra Vida y Territorio.

6 Cabanas, A., 2019, Op. Cit.

7 For further information on the subject of the Bolas river in the municipality of Champerico see Cabanas, A., *Aproximación a las luchas por el agua y la vida. El caso del río Bolas, municipio de Champerico, Retalhuleu*, Asociación Ceiba, Guatemala, julio 2017.

8 Quoted from the Virtual Forum: [Comunidades en defensa del agua en la costa sur de Guatemala](#) (Op. Cit.).

disappearance of riverside forests and mangroves, which are often cut down, and reduces the areas dedicated to fish farming, which can be either the main or complementary productive activity for the communities.⁹

The right to health of the local population is affected by this intensive agriculture which, striving for maximum economic yield, makes use of polluting products (insecticides, herbicides and products that accelerate the process of sugar cane growth), often launched from small planes and which, therefore, also contaminate the population's subsistence crops and water reserves. Added to this are the effects of the *zafra* – the burning of the remains of the sugarcane crops that takes place annually between the months of November and May – which causes respiratory illnesses.

All of the above has a differentiated impact on women, as the scarcity of water due to the drying up of the wells forces them to travel farther (and more often) to collect water, exposing them to the risk of violence (of various types, including sexual violence), and damage to their physical health due to the weight of carrying the water. They are also more exposed to dermatological diseases caused by the toxic agro-chemicals which have polluted the water they use for laundry and daily cleaning. They are also impacted by the increase in illnesses caused by the mono-cultures, both people working in the cane plantations and in the population that lives in the surrounding areas. Thus, time they need to dedicate to family health care has increased.¹⁰

As a result, the communities of the Southern Coast are experiencing conditions of deep exploitation, impoverishment, water scarcity, and poor health. The population does not have access to land to cultivate and is

forced to buy primary goods, whose prices are increasingly higher. These are the profoundly negative impacts of an agro-export model, whose main objective is economic gain for an elite, in the face of the impoverishment and exploitation of the majority of the population and, by extension, the common good.

Social Struggles in the Southern Coast and the State response

The history of social organization on the Southern Coast goes back a long way: in the 1960s the communities began to form cooperatives; in the 1980s there were strikes protesting exploitative labor conditions and in the 1990s the returnee movement engaged in negotiations and land purchases. This organizational experience allowed for a strong popular movement to come together in the early 2010s, in response to the negative impacts of the increase in mono-cultures across the region and

the drying up of the rivers. It is within this framework which, in 2015, the CCR was created.

“The main objective of the CCR is to respond to an economic model imposed by the companies and by the State, which oppresses the agricultural population in the region, violating their human rights, their access to land and water. In the CCR we work in defense of life, water and land and so that the customs and cultures of the people are respected” (Virgilio García Carrillo, member of the organization's Board of Directors).

It was also during this period that the March for Water, Mother Earth, Territory and Life was created. This took place between April 11 and 22, 2016 and originated on the Southern Coast.¹¹ Within the framework of the March for Water, as well as in the Declaration of Champerico (2016)¹², the population demanded the recovery of the river basins, reparations for the damage caused to the environment and the



The criminalized human rights defenders with their lawyers in front of the court house in Retalhuleu.

9 Cabanas, A., 2017, Op. Cit.

10 Quoted from the radio program Voces de Madre Selva, *Lo amargo de la caña de azúcar*, 01.10.2020.

11 Cabria, E., y Olmstead, G., *La marcha del agua: 260 kilómetros de conciencia*, Nómada, Guatemala, 23.04.2016.

12 *Declaración de Champerico*, 19.11.2016

people, and the transformation from an agricultural model of exportation to a model of food sovereignty, which would place respect and recognition for indigenous identity at the center. At the same time that they were advancing proposals aimed at solving the different problems posed by the massification of mono-culture, the communities turned to the State to denounce the diversion of rivers, the cutting of mangroves and forests, the attacks on protected species, and pollution, all of which were perpetrated by farmers and sugar mills.

Cabanas has analyzed the complaints and proposals of the communities, concluding that the Guatemalan State is participating in the alarming environmental and social degradation of the Southern Coast, as well as engaging in aggression towards the environment and the communities, by the omission of its duties.¹³ This is evident, on the one hand, through the lack of prosecution for companies which have polluted or diverted rivers. They have managed to avoid legal consequences despite the complaints filed by the communities. On the other hand, the State has allowed the appropriation of water, due to the in-existence of normative and legal frameworks (water law and/or public policies in this respect) that recognize the right to water as fundamental, and which penalize the pollution, diversion, appropriation and use of water to the detriment of human rights.

However, community mobilization and participation in demanding the restitution of their rights has been, and continues to be, persecuted and criminalized. This is the case of the four members of the CCR which PBI accompanies, who form



part of the Board of Directors and who, since 2018, have endured a process of criminalization. Anabella España Reyes, Abelino Mejía Cancino, Flavio Vicente and Virgilio García Carrillo have been targets of accusations of coercion, threats and illegal detentions for acts which, supposedly, took place during a meeting in which representatives from the El Pilar, El Tular, Magdalena, Santa Ana and Pantaleón sugar mills participated in 2018. Although the judge in the first instance declared the accusations to be without merit, the case was appealed by a plaintiff representing the El Pilar sugar mill and later accepted by the Mixed Court of Retalhuleu. The hearing scheduled for early October was suspended until January 15, 2021.

The processes of criminalization (through judicialization, but also through defamation on social media), the direct threats received by the members of the CCR, as well as the processes of co-optation of the communities (by buying-off of leaders and spreading of rumors about the leadership) have had terrible consequences on the health of the human rights defenders, as well as on their families and social organizations.

“We need people to realize that when they consume sugar, it has an impact on the life of the communities and on the right to water for all. We call for the consumption of what is healthy and good produced by the campesinos and not products made by the big companies” (Abelino Mejía Cancino, member of the CCR).¹⁴

13 Cabanas, A., 2019, Op. Cit.

14 Quoted in the [Foro Virtual: Comunidades en defensa del agua en la costa sur de Guatemala](#) (Op. Cit.).

Fighting corruption from the municipal level

New accompaniment for the Association of Neighbors Against Corruption in Patzicía (AVCCP)



Carlos Sajmolo during a protest in Patzicía, Photo: Carlos Sajmolo

Corruption is a global problem, which severely impacts people's well-being. No country in the world is exempt from cases of criminal acts committed by public officials and authorities who abuse the power entrusted to them to administer public resources efficiently, democratically, and transparently. These resources have been generated by the very people from the country so that they can be put to use for the common good, but they are used by corrupt officials for personal advantage and enrichment.

Carlos Sajmoló Pichiyá, AVCCP Representative and Spokesperson¹

According to the international coalition Transparency International, Guatemala is among the most corrupt countries

in the world. This coalition produces an annual Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the most widely used indicator of

corruption worldwide. The CPI scores and classifies countries and territories according to the public's perception of corruption, collected through surveys and evaluations compiled by accredited institutions.² Guatemala's ranking in 2019 was 146 out of 180 countries evaluated. It is also among the five most corrupt countries in the Americas,³ ranking 11th of the 15 countries included in the Fighting Corruption Capacity Index, developed by the Anti-Corruption Working Group of the Americas Society (AS) and the Council of the Americas (COA). According to

1 All the quotations are extracted from the interview realized by PBI Guatemala to Carlos Sajmoló Pichiyá as part of the virtual program ACÉRCATE, of September 15 of 2020, via Facebook PBI - Guatemala Project. [The video is to be found on our website.](#)

2 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi>

3 Sapalú, L., Montepeque, F., *Guatemala entre los cinco países más corruptos en América*, El Periódico, 24.01.2020.

this index, Guatemala experienced a setback in its legal and democratic capacities following the departure of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in August 2019, which was unilaterally dissolved by the government of Jimmy Morales in January of that year. A very positive development highlighted by the index, however, was the strengthening of organized civil society which, unlike other countries, has maintained the fight against corruption as a central theme among its citizen demands.⁴

Organized citizens exercise their right to monitor and denounce abuses

The AVCCP is a grassroots organization, with no links to political parties. It is made up of more than 150 residents from the municipality of Patzicía (Chimaltenango), most of whom are Maya Kaqchikel. This association began its struggle on August 26, 2016, inspired by the citizen mobilizations that took place throughout the country in 2015, as well as by the work of the CICIG, which led to the unveiling and prosecution of several corruption networks at the highest levels of the State.⁵

The neighbor begin organizing to monitor the actions of municipal corporations in response to irregularities in the administration of municipal public services, specifically water distribution and public lighting management, in the municipality of Patzicía. In addition, they also focused on monitoring the actions of the municipal government in relation to public investments, demanding that citizens be consulted about issues of interest and that their decisions be respected.

In 2020, the National Network of Citizen Commissions and Collectives for Transparency and Probity (at the national level), of which the AVCCP is a member, was formed and launched.

ACÉRCATE

al ejercicio de ciudadanía y a la lucha contra la corrupción a nivel local en Patzicía, Chimaltenango.

Conversamos con Carlos Sajmoló Pichiyá, representante de la Asociación de Vecinos contra la Corrupción en Patzicía (AVCCP).



El 15 de septiembre a las 10am CST



To listen to the interview to Carlos Sajmolo, take a look at our website: <https://pbi-guatemala.org/es/multimedia/videos>

This network allows for the exchange of good practices in the fight against corruption and mutual strengthening between organizations.

The AVCCP relies on the principal legislative instruments in force to carry out its actions: the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (1996), ratified by the state of Guatemala in 2001; the United Nations Convention against Corruption, adopted by its General Assembly in 2003; and the Law against Corruption, decreed by the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala in 2012.

Carlos Sajmoló Pichiyá, representative of the AVCCP, explains the reason for the association's existence: "Guatemala has had to endure the looting of our national coffers by public officials, in

addition to robbery by the economic elites. The illicit enrichment of public officials causes increased poverty for the people. The actions of the AVCCP are based on the conviction that there can be no peace in Guatemala while there is corruption, only a few benefit from this illicit enrichment meanwhile the majority of the population experiences further unjust impoverishment."

One of the most recent actions taken by the AVCCP was a social audit of the implementation of state programs to combat the COVID-19 crisis in the municipality of Patzicía. During the first half of 2020, the government of Alejandro Giammattei had been overseeing the distribution of an unprecedented package of assistance funds to combat the negative effects of this crisis, especially the lack of work and income for

4 Simón, R., Aalbers, G., *The Capacity to Combat the Corruption (CCC) Index*, AS/COA Anti-Corruption Working Group, Americas Quarterly, Control Risks, julio 2020.
 5 CICIG, *Informe de Cierre: El legado de Justicia en Guatemala*, 20.08.2019.

households, increased malnutrition and starvation. Given Guatemala's structural weaknesses in public contracting and other related areas, concerns have been raised that much of these funds, which were approved to alleviate the effects of the health crisis, are unlikely to be used for this purpose. The recently created Presidential Commission against Corruption has already identified irregularities in several government institutions in the management of these funds.⁶ The AVCCP will present the results of the audit publicly, in order to demonstrate the importance of an attentive and critical citizenry which, as its representative comments, can serve as an example for other municipalities and communities across the country.

In the words of Carlos Sajmoló: "Not only must corruption be punished, it must be prevented, and this can be done through social audits. The AVCCP preaches by example: Our dream is that Guatemala will have 340 organizations which fight against corruption, as many organizations as there are municipalities in the country. It is time to unite our thoughts and voices to monitor how the public resources of the people of Guatemala are managed, so that we can have functional public institutions such as education, health care, etc. It is time to fight so that future generations

can enjoy a country where development can finally begin."

The risks of fighting corruption

The work carried out by the AVCCP has resulted in acts of aggression and political persecution towards its leaders. Carlos Sajmoló Pichiyá, spokesperson for the organization, has experienced various attacks and threats, including physical assault and illegal detention. However, the most serious attack against the organization so far has been the process of criminalization against Carlos Sajmoló himself. This process of criminalization is a malicious response to his demand that the Municipal Development Council (COMUDE) of Patzicía's rejection, which has been documented, be respected and that a community consultation regarding the project to build a substation by the company Red Eléctrica de Centroamérica S.A. (RECSA) in the municipality be carried out. On August 22, 2018, the municipality of Patzicía granted a license for the construction of the substation, whose application had previously been rejected by the COMUDE. As a result, there were a series of social mobilizations organized by the AVCCP and the COMUDE of Patzicía, demanding respect for the right to prior community consultation,

which culminated in the revocation of the license on September 18, 2018.

The public hearing against the human rights defender was held on January 29, 2020, during which he was accused of the crimes of threatening the security of public services, activities threatening the security of the nation, threats, coercion, instigation to commit crime, illegal arrests, and illegal detentions for actions allegedly committed during the September 2018 protests. The judge declared lack of merit, however, RECSA and the Public Ministry appealed the resolution, and the accusation was presented to the Mixed Regional Chamber of the Court of Appeals of Antigua Guatemala. In mid-October, Carlos Sajmoló received the notification informing him that this chamber rejected the appeal and reconfirmed the original decision lack of merit issued on August 11 of this year.

PBI began to accompany the AVCCP in April as a result of the threats and the criminalization process described. We are monitoring their situation by telephone and raising awareness about their case and the important citizen work they are carrying out, through our advocacy and communication programs.

6 Cuevas, D., *Coronavirus: Instituciones se aprovechan de la pandemia para comprar en fracciones*, Prensa Libre, 8.09.2020.

PBI is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) which provides international accompaniment and observation at the request of threatened social organizations. The presence of international volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence.

PBI in Guatemala

PBI maintained a team of volunteers in Guatemala from 1983 to 1999. During those years, it carried out accompaniment work with human rights organizations, unions, indigenous and campesino organizations, refugees and churches. In 1999, after an evaluation process, it was decided to close the project since the country had greatly advanced in the opening of space for the work of human rights organizations. Nevertheless, **PBI** continued attentive to the happenings in Guatemala through a follow-up committee.

From the middle of 2000, **PBI** began receiving a number of requests for international accompaniment. Due to these requests, **PBI** carried out an investigation in the field that made evident a turn in the direction and a losing of space for human rights defenders. In April of 2002, **PBI** decided to reopen the Guatemala Project in order to carry out international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other

international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other international accompaniment NGOs. In April 2003, the new **PBI** office was opened in Guatemala.

Purpose and principles

Contribute to improve the human rights situation in Guatemala and accompany social and political processes that promote the enhancement of democracy and participation in the country and the region. To attain this, **PBI** employs an international presence that supports the maintenance and opening of political and social spaces for human rights defenders, organizations and other social expressions facing repression due to their work supporting human rights.

PBI follows the principles of non-violence, non-partisanship and non-interference.

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