



**Friends of  
the Earth  
International**



# Women defending life and natural resources: Cases in Central America



**economic  
justice and  
resisting  
neoliberalism**

# Friends of the Earth International's vision

Friends of the Earth International is the world's largest grassroots environmental network, uniting over 70 national member groups and some 5,000 local activist groups on every continent. With over 1.5 million members and supporters around the world, we campaign on today's most urgent environmental and social issues.

We are a vibrant, trustworthy and effective federation, committed to social transformation and the building of sustainable, equitable societies with gender justice. Our strength stems from our solidarity, our passion and our shared beliefs. We respect each other and value our diversity. We inspire and induce social change by living according to our values and learning from our experiences.

Also, we are inspired by successful campaigns and derive our strength from the friendships and alliances we build. We believe the future of our children will be better because of what we do.

Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature. We envision a society of interdependent people living in dignity, wholeness and fulfillment in which equity and human and peoples' rights are realized. This will be a society built upon peoples' sovereignty and participation. It will be founded on social, economic, gender and environmental justice and be free from all forms of domination and exploitation, such as neoliberalism, corporate globalization, neo-colonialism and militarism.

## **CREDITS:**

**CESTA Chair:** Ricardo Navarro

**CESTA Executive Director:** Silvia Quiroa

**Authors:** Marta Muñoz, Awex Mejia Cipriano, Elias Raymundo Raymundo, COECOCEIBA Friends of the Earth Costa Rica, Azalia Espinoza, Jazziel Baca, Martha Silva,

**Coordination and editing:** Ana María Vásquez

**Printing & Design:** Imagen Gráfica El Salvador, S.A, de C.V.

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## Introduction

Throughout history, capitalism has driven the looting of strategic resources from the people, generating poverty and environmental destruction through the implementation of various economic models, including liberalism, welfare state, neoliberalism and ultimately the extractive model.

The Central American region has aligned itself to these models by implementing a series of processes touted as economic and financial integration: power grid interconnectivity systems, regional Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), joint customs policies and infrastructure projects such as roads and ports that open the doors to transnational corporations and their greedy interests, in the name of "growth and development" of a region with vast mineral wealth, the largest biodiversity reserve, a third of the available fresh water resources and nearly a third of the planet's forests, which are given away in the framework of these national and regional policies.

### **As Zubizarreta points out:<sup>1</sup>**

"It is not difficult to find this reality, but especially to confirm the political, economic, cultural and legal power held by transnational companies, which allows

them to exercise great influence over the policies and regulations of States and international institutions. Their rights are protected through a new *lex mercatoria*<sup>2</sup> made up of laws and a set of State, bilateral, regional and multilateral trade and investment rules and contracts. In addition, they have at their disposal the decisions of private arbitration courts that are included in various treaties. One way or the other, national policies are subordinated to this Global Corporate Law whose compliance is ensured with strong and mandatory rules. Meanwhile, the obligations of multinational corporations are limited to national legislations marked by a neoliberal logic. Fragile international human rights law and voluntary codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility are not enough to control their social, labor, cultural and environmental impacts".

As the basic goal is capital growth, this corporate world favors the development of industries that ensure the biggest profits, such as mining and agroindustrial monocultures. Even within each of these sectors, priority is given to the most profitable production activities. A sort of manifest destiny is thus established at the service of corporate interests that run in the completely opposite direction than those of development, the improvement

1 Hernández Zubizarreta, J. and Ramiro, P. (2012): "Seguridad jurídica", in Hernández Zubizarreta, J. González, E. and Ramiro, P. (eds.), *Diccionario crítico de empresas transnacionales. Claves para enfrentar el poder de las grandes corporaciones*, Icaria, Barcelona.

2 The merchant law, (*Lex Mercatoria* in Latin) was initially a legal system used by merchants in Medieval Europe. Through this set of rules and principles established by the merchants themselves, they regulated their own relations.

of the quality of life, social justice and sustainability.

The development of extractive projects requires the occupation and intervention of vast extensions of land, with intensive use of huge amounts of pure water and toxic substances. Meeting these requirements involves massive destruction of the environment and a serious deterioration in the living conditions of the affected communities, which can even end up having their access to vital resources such as water denied.

Owing to this logic, the Central American region is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis, with those who are appropriating the natural resources failing to see the environment as a vital system for human survival, but rather as another commodity to be owned and exploited.

In this way, the harmful effects of environmental destruction are felt differently by men and women. For instance, one important impact on women related to their reproductive health is the exposure to agrottoxics and the difficulties

that arise due to the context of poverty and marginalization surrounding them, in addition to their lack of capacity to prevent environmental risks, due to the obstacles they face to access and control resources and to participate in the decision making processes when public policies are developed.

Seen from this perspective, the actions that expose women to these dangers can be summarized in two: marginalization and lack of power to reverse these conditions that are combined with the strategies of corporations that hire them and expose them to vulnerable conditions. For instance, research on the indiscriminate use of agrottoxics has shown that these products cause frequent poisoning amongst agroindustrial women workers: vomits, fainting, stomach aches, chronic headaches, breathing conditions. Likewise, exposure to these toxic substances is associated to women in their reproductive ages having babies with birth defects related to the closure of the neural tube: anencephaly, hydrocephaly, among others.

## Dismantling corporate power Reactions from affected women

Despite the fact that conservative political elites, national oligarchies and economic power groups form a united front with companies to clean up their image and repress protests—a situation that is increasingly common in Central American countries—, the reaction of women-led communities has been adding up, especially after knowing the real impact these projects have on their health, their environmental wealth, their cultures and economies.

After discovering that industrial operations generate false expectations of employment and don't even produce income for national governments, be it through taxes or royalties, women are increasingly reacting against the policies that prevent them from accessing valuable natural resources that are dedicated instead to transnational trade, such as in the case of the privatization of water. In addition, there is now stronger opposition against Free Trade Agreements under the terms of transnational corporations, that enable looting and the destruction of resources by weakening national regulations even further.

The signing of Peace Agreements and the “transition to democracy” in Central America can be placed in a context of increasing conflicts over land. From the resistance of indigenous communities against the development of hydroelectric dams in the territories of Guatemala, El

Salvador and Honduras, to citizens' and community mobilizations against open pit mining in all the countries of the region, to agrarian conflicts around monoculture plantations such as pineapples in Costa Rica and African oil palm and sugarcane in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, all seem to testify the reproduction of long rooted looting dynamics in the region, combined with new actors and dynamics linked to the transnationalization of the Central American economy and its ways of inserting itself into the global economy.

In this context, there is a rise in the leadership of women who take on a prominent role to face the escalation of abuse, the looting of resources, the expropriation and impoverishment of communities. Women leaders such as Berta Cáceres in Honduras emerge –a leader of the indigenous Lenca community and the peasants movement, who organized the Lenca people in Honduras in their struggle against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam to be built on Gualcarque River, a river that is sacred for indigenous peoples. With her persistence and systematic implementation of actions she was successful in getting foreign companies to withdraw from the project, with an important victory against one of the largest construction companies in the world, SINOHYDRO.

Two years after her murder, the organization founded by the Honduran

environmental activist, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) stated: “With Berta Cáceres we learned unforgettable lessons, such as the need to link the anticapitalist, antipatriarchal and antiracist struggles”. In the same way, they highlighted the efforts of their leader to reaffirm the “dignity of the Lenca people”, who “defend their rivers, forests, territories and freedom”. Also, they highlighted the view of feminism held by Berta in her community (...) “joining the sister who suffers the various forms of patriarchal capitalism”. “We saw her exercising her right to choose over her own body, despite patriarchal and misogynistic abuses (...). Berta was, above all, a revolutionary and free woman, who lived as she felt and thought”, said COPINH<sup>3</sup>.

In El Salvador, Dora “Alicia” Sorto Recinos, a community member in Cabañas Department was murdered on

December 26, 2009, when she was 8 months pregnant. She was opposing the Pacific Rim mining project, a subsidiary of Canadian corporation Pacific Rim Mining, which in 2002 started exploration works in El Dorado mine, 65 kilometers North-West of San Salvador. Her murder remains unpunished to this very day. The inhabitants of the area think that behind a series of threats to community radios and the murder of “Alicia” stands transnational corporation Oceana Gold, the new owner, aiming to create an atmosphere of terror and emergency to hinder denunciations and actions by environmental activists.

Threats, murders, forced displacements are seen throughout Central America, they are the common denominator to silence women who fight to reverse the intervention of transnational corporations in the territories. These are some of their stories of commitment and struggle to defend life and natural resources.

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3 Lecciones de Berta Cáceres: lucha anticapitalista y antipatriarcal, March 2nd, 2017, Noticias TELESUR.

# 1. El Salvador. Women defend water and confront Coca Cola in Nejapa Municipality

Marta Eugenia Muñoz

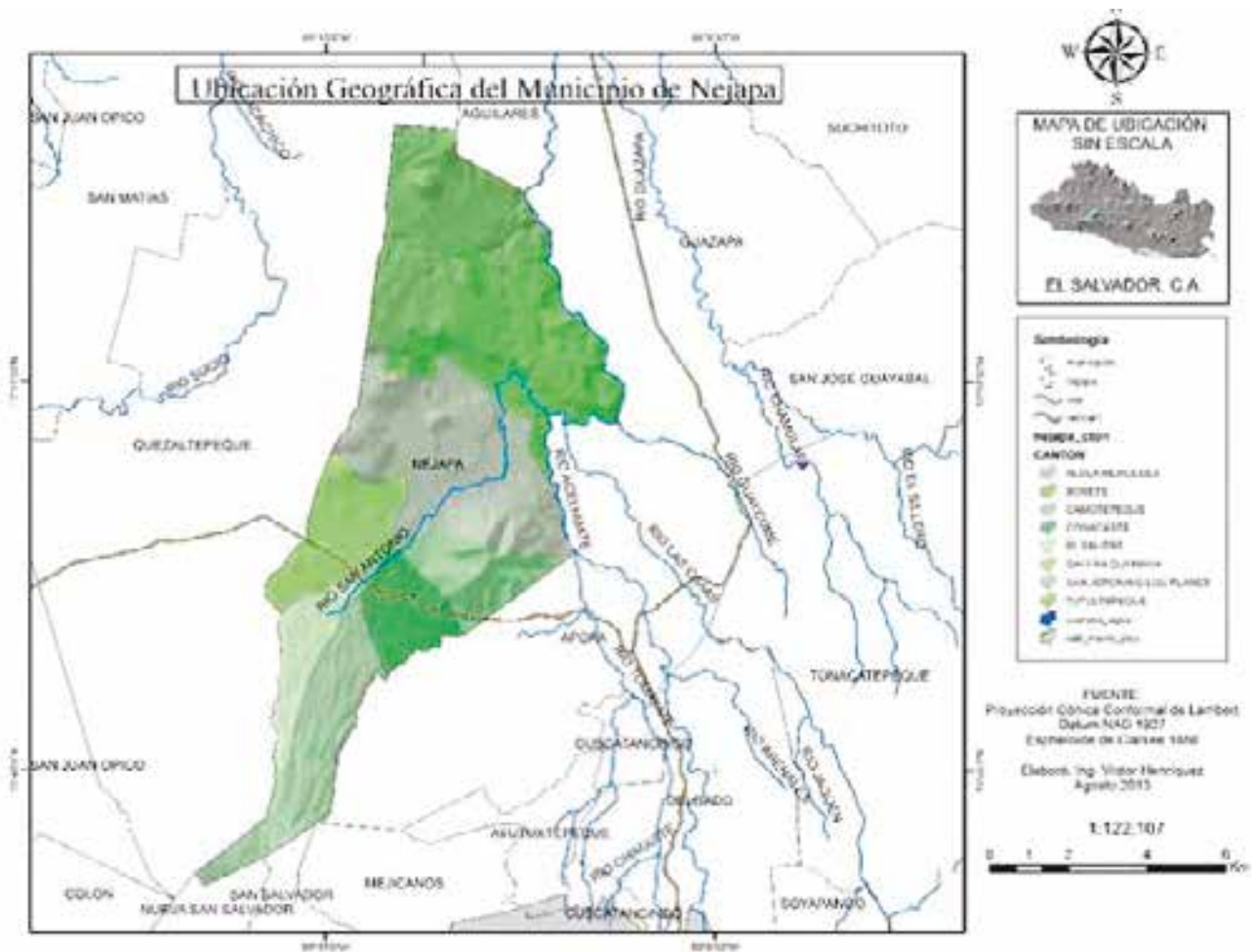
## 1.1. Introduction

El Salvador is one of the most deforested countries in Latin America, with a high population density of around 300 inhabitants per square kilometer. According to official figures, in the rural areas only 55% of the population has access to piped water, while in the city those numbers are near to 90%. In the countryside, the families without access to piped water take their water from wells and rivers, which is not adequate for human consumption. Even

though it is low quality, this natural resource is becoming scarce.

## 1.2. Background

Embotelladora Salvadoreña SA, founded in 1965, started operations with Coca Cola company in El Salvador, in Soyapango municipality. When the aquifer in the city was exhausted in 1994, Coca Cola's plant was transferred to Nejapa municipality. In 2005, SAB Miller acquired the entire company.



Map with the geographical location of Nejapa municipality. Source: DIGESTYC.



Nejapa municipality (made up of eight cantons and 43 villages), is located in San Salvador Department. According to a 2017 household survey, 29,458 people live there, 52% of which are men and 42% are women; its rural population is becoming increasingly urban due to its proximity with the capital city San Salvador, which translates into more people, more industries and more impact on social and environmental resources.

One of the most serious challenges faced by the inhabitants of Nejapa is related to the human right to drinking water. The municipality is located on the Nejapa/Quezaltepeque aquifer, which is key for supplying water to 46% of the population in the capital city due to its dimensions. This aquifer is part of the San Antonio River Basin, which is of great interest for its clean water output potential (it produces 7.4 million cubic meters per year). The recharge of this aquifer largely depends on what happens in Nejapa, where it also became an exploited resource in the past decade owing to the increasing industrial activity in the area, thus putting it under constant pressure. Among others, a bottling plant owned by transnational corporation Coca Cola (Industrias La Constancia / Sab Miller), Salvadoran companies such as MECAFE, Salazar Romero, and others are now to be found in the area.

### **1.3. Expropriation of water resources by transnational corporation Coca Cola**

In 1996, three years before starting operations, the company was granted a permit to exploit approximately two million

cubic meters of water per year. This meant extracting 66.67 liters per second from the aquifer. At that time, the no longer existing Water Resources Protection Committee (CEPRHI) in charge of national water management issued a resolution about the potential impacts the construction and operation of the Coca Cola plant would have on the Nejapa water resources. CEPRHI pointed out that:

- The company should identify an area in the water catchment that it would commit to protect in order to ensure the sustainability of the aquifer.
- It stated that only 25% of the area should be waterproofed;
- A ban on industrial waste water discharges into the San Antonio River should be enacted, to avoid its pollution;
- That ANDA, as the agency responsible for drinking water supply services, especially in urban areas, should oversee the extraction of water by the bottling company.

Finally in 1999, with all permits approved, the company started operating, just a year after the passing of the Salvadoran Environment Law. Since then, Industrias La Constancia / Sab Miller has expanded its facilities several times. But the permit requests submitted to the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry (MARN) were filed under the category of "warehouse expansion", which allowed the company to avoid having to submit independent environmental impact studies. Said Law, in its article 21,

paragraph J establishes that “all works or projects, among them industrial and agroindustrial plants, shall be subject to environmental impact studies”. Although it is clear that the activity of a soda bottling company should have been subject to these clauses, in most of the resolutions analyzed this was not the case. The bottling company only had to complete an environmental form, regulated by the same article 21 of the Environment Law Regulation, through which companies present an affidavit about the veracity of the information submitted, including the information related to environmental impacts.

Starting in 2012, this situation began to change. That was when the Coca Cola bottling company requested permission for a new expansion of its plant, in this case to produce bottled water under the trademark Cristal. ILC/Sab Miller would bottle and distribute this water from that facility, where it would also produce the plastic bottles and prepare the products for the industrial process, and wash the bottles. In its permit request, it argued that the treatment process needed would be simplified, thus requiring less water extraction. As in previous cases, they requested the Ministry’s environmental form, but this time the authorities prompted them to conduct, finally, an Environmental Impact Assessment. The following year, in February 2013, Industrias La Constancia / Sab Miller submitted the corresponding report, prepared by J.R Duarte.

This document stated that the drinking water would be supplied by extracting water from the two already existing deep wells in the Nejapa Plant; that the water

to be used would not require special treatment (referring to water quality analyses conducted in 2011-2012), and that they would therefore discharge the waste water directly into the San Antonio River Basin, and that the waste that could not be recycled would be stored in a MIDES landfill. Oddly, the report stated that they use 1.2 million cubic meters of water per year, when in 1996 they had requested permission to extract two million. In particular, in terms of water consumption, the company ensured in the report that they will ensure an “efficient use” water and that they would reduce the total extraction of water by 13%, in addition to promoting community development actions. They argue that each year they extract 15.63 million cubic meters of water from the aquifer, but that the potential recharge mounts to 21.76 million, so that there would be 6.13 million available to use (meaning a total of 194 liters per second). They argue that ILC/Sab Miller only wants to expand its consumption by 79.1 cubic meters per month. This is what the bottling company’s report states.

In response to the imminent potential authorization for the expansion of the Coca Cola bottling plant, an important social mobilization was promoted in Nejapa, where the population rejected the expansion plans due to the severe impacts of industrial activity on the aquifer, which is critical for the area, in the form of an evident reduction of the amount of water in their communities, and the reduced quality of water, as expressed by Josefina Escamilla, a woman leader of the social movement.



*Josefina Escamilla, leader of Las Marias I and II communities.  
Photo: CESTA – Friends of the Earth El Salvador*

In 2013, a public consultation process was started by a social platform uniting about 100 Salvadoran social organizations around the right to water. One of the main concerns from the beginning was to determine whether the Nejapa/Quezaltepeque aquifer had the potential to continue being exploited, and which measures should be implemented to ensure its protection and sustainability, given that it is a crucial source of water supply for human consumption. In April 2013, the public consultation managed to gather 2200 signatures opposing the project, while several statements were issued denouncing LC/SabMiller's campaign to take over this strategic reserve.

Josefina Escamilla gives an account of the struggle in defense of water. The Nejapa leader states that her concern started when she verified that the amount of water in the San Antonio River was rapidly decreasing: "I went to the tank to test the water, and the level dropped month after month. This is how I proved to the communal organizations that we needed to plan protests, that it was necessary because the well was already in operation, even without the permits, and that was why we had less water." With the help of the communities, we organized a march.

"We blocked one lane of the road, and we were nearly hit by a car. I told my comrades that we should block the entrance to Coca Cola to prevent the trucks from entering



*Protest against the expansion of the Coca Cola Plant. Close-up of Josefina Escamilla, leader of the Las Marias I and II Communities. Photo: Pedro Armestre.*

or leaving. In the end, after protesting and chanting, they let us enter the plant, and since I have some knowledge of the place, I told them 'there is the tank, there is the well, they have already opened it', and the representatives of Coca Cola said that 'the well wasn't being used', but it was in fact being used."

To substantiate their claims and file a complaint, the social organizations conducted and submitted a technical study on the aquifer titled "Review and analysis of the hydrological and hydro geological components of the hydrogeological, hydrological and hydraulic risk assessment of the Nejapa Plant Area. Industrias la Constancia, ILC. Nejapa, San Salvador." The study rebuts the data presented by the bottling company in their Environmental Impact Assessment. The study was conducted by

renowned hydrologist Julio Quiñonez of El Salvador, and it accuses ILC/SabMiller of altering many parameters. In addition to questioning the data submitted by the company, the hydrologist affirmed that the state and condition of the aquifer is worse than previously thought. In particular, he reaches four conclusions that should have been enough to halt the project:

- In the environmental impact assessment conducted by ILC/Sab Miller, the data on the water balance were altered, because they analyzed the basin in a biased and erroneous way. In fact, they didn't take into account the lower part of the basin, leaving out of the analysis a significant amount of wells that had to be included in order to estimate current extraction levels. According to the study conducted by the hydrologist, the aquifer had an

annual recharge capacity of about 18 million cubic meters (not 21 million as stated by the company), and at that time consumption amounted to 7-10 million, including the exploitation by ILC and the water supplied by ANDA to the inhabitants of the capital city.

- In addition, the study demonstrates that the company was using 34.67 million cubic meters per year (the company stated that this figure amounted to 15 million). This means that they are extracting 191.54% of the aquifer's water, i.e. 100% of the entire annual recharge (18.10 million cubic meters) plus another 16.57 million cubic meters of the aquifer reserves. Evidence of this is that in 1998 the company extracted water from well 2 at 31.04 meters deep and in 2012 they had to go down to 75.69 meters. This data allows concluding that, at this rate of extraction, the aquifer will be exhausted in 30 years, or in 27 years if climate change is taken into account.
- Figures by the Ministry itself point out that opening a new well, in addition to the two that are already being exploited, would imply the extraction of approximately 1.7 million cubic meters more per year.

In essence, the report establishes that whether ILC/SabMiller expands its plant or not, the reality is that the Nejapa aquifer cannot be exploited any further. It even states that current extraction levels should be reduced to 20 million. And this is a conclusion that is consistent with what was established in the 2005 Dynamic Water Balance of El Salvador, which

warned that the aquifer was reaching its limit a decade ago.

## Pollution

However, Coca Cola ILC / SabMiller's intervention in the area is not only limited to looting water resources, it also generates three types of waste that affect Nejapa's environment:

- Gases: are released to the atmosphere, because the company has no gas management system in place.
- Liquids: are discharged into Los Amates creek, whose water is used to sprinkle the Mides landfill to reduce dust levels, and as a source of water for cattle to drink.

This creek flows into the San Antonio River, which the rural population usually drinks from when their water supply is not guaranteed.

- Sludge: is trucked every day to the Mides landfill. Industrias La Constancia / SabMiller has two sludge dams, and eight tons leave its facilities every day, to be dumped at the Integral Management of Solid Waste (MIDES) company's landfill, built to service 10 municipalities, but which is now providing garbage disposal services to 110 municipalities. Some communities have complained that ILC / SabMiller dumps its sludge into a glen that affects the Los Amates creek, polluting it. "From time to time they dump sludge in the creek and the water turns black. It takes up to three days for that water to run downstream, and the chimbolitos fish die", says a community member.



*Creeks polluted with solid waste and industrial sludge discharges, Las Marias I community, Nejapa, Photo: CESTA – Friends of the Earth El Salvador.*

#### **1.4. Impacts on the rights of women resulting from Coca Cola's looting of water resources**

##### **Health and Sanitation**

When we speak of the right to water and sanitation, it is necessary to take into account gender inequality, since it is mainly women and children who take care of the domestic chores that depend on this resource, and those who are in charge of their management. This shows that the lack of access to water and sanitation specifically affects the health, education, employment and income of women: less availability or accessibility implies an important investment in time for fetching water, in addition to being

exposed to other risk factors including delinquency and the health effects from physical overwork resulting from carrying the water, especially in rural areas.

Likewise, women are the ones showing most concern about the situation of water in Nejapa, since they experience first-hand the daily difficulties caused by the lack of a continuous supply. In addition, they are the ones who first detect the cases of contamination due to bad smells and the ones who go directly to the plant to demand explanations. At the community meetings and assemblies held with Coca Cola's executives, the role of women was clearly highlighted, as well as their prominent role in decision making and changes in the Nejapa municipality, and they even managed to mobilize the rest

of the population, promoting the different actions that have been carried out. It is important to highlight the empowerment of women in this struggle, because even though being in charge of daily tasks related to the use of water, they usually do not have a say in decision making processes related to the control of the resources.

The pollution of water bodies is the direct responsibility of Coca Cola as a result of the lack of treatment of their waste water, which directly affects the right of the Nejapa women to health and a healthy environment. Pollution has a detrimental effect on women and girls, who are exposed to serious outbreaks of diseases, for instance mosquito-borne diseases. Women have no other choice but to fill tanks and other containers with water for household use, and this water could involuntarily become the ideal space for the reproduction of mosquitoes, if not covered or treated. The precarious sewage infrastructure also causes the presence of stagnated water in the communities. In the specific case of the Zika outbreak, the transmission of which is not limited to the mosquito bite, but which is also sexually transmitted, women and girls did not have access to information or complete services in the municipality related to their reproductive health.

Many of them cannot avoid unplanned pregnancies or make informed decisions about their pregnancies. Some of them feared having babies affected with microcephaly. The fear of criminal prosecution for having an abortion forced them to resort to generally unsafe

clandestine procedures to interrupt unwanted pregnancies.

### **Water availability**

The impacts of Coca Cola on the right to water availability are dramatic. Taking into account that many households in Nejapa –30.14% of which are headed by women according to the 2017 household survey— do not have access to piped water and that some communities get their water supply from springs and water wells, it was verified that the industrial activity implies the use and availability of large amounts of water, in contrast with the reality of a significant part of the population whose access to this resource is not guaranteed. It can be easily concluded that one of the main impacts is that every drop of water that goes to the industry is not used to supply piped water to households, thus mainly affecting the activities of women, who are the most affected by the lack of water, given their household chores inside the homes, and that have to get around to fetch it. The time spent on fetching water limits the time available for the affected women to undertake other activities, such as participating in educational and cultural activities, spending more quality time with their children and families, or taking well-deserved rest after exhausting work hours. It is particularly interesting to consider here that if the women heading households work outside their homes, the burden of the double working day is aggravated due to the efforts of having to get around fetching water for consumption. The alternative they have is buying water to fill bigger private water containers, but this leads to additional non-budgeted expenses, thus dramatically reducing their economic income.



*Inhabitants of the rural areas of Nejapa washing. Photo: Edgardo Ayala, IPS.*

On the other hand, drinking water is expensive for the population, but not for Coca Cola. Josefina Escamilla states that given the lack of specific regulations for big consumers or companies, Coca Cola pays the same price for water that a small business operation. When the municipal government has tried to remedy this situation, it hasn't had the support of the Legislative Assembly to pass a law that allows fair compensation for the exploitation of the vital resource in this municipality.

Water scarcity resulting from over exploitation and looting of this natural resource, has even put food security at risk, since the women who had home

gardens as a dietary complement and to support their often scarce incomes, have had to give them up, because the water for irrigation has to be used for other purposes including consumption and hygiene, which take priority when managing the little amount of water they can access.

## **1.5. Conclusions**

El Salvador lacks an overall water management policy framework. There is no Water Law, and the right to water is not enshrined in the Constitution, which means that industrial uses of water are not regulated. There is a Water Resources Integrated Management Law,



but it lacks practical applicability and institutional structure. The lack of national legislation and the pressure exerted by companies make regulation difficult in Nejapa. The coverage of drinking water services is scarce in rural areas. In addition, deforestation, soil degradation and pollution are reducing the recharge capacity of groundwater reserves and the potentiality to make the best use of water. With the current rate of extraction and considering the effects of climate change, the aquifer will be exhausted in 25-27 years.

Knowledge about the ILC/SabMiller plant expansion plans has generated an unprecedented social mobilization in the area led, by women and the local municipal government. This is a big step in the defense of the right to water and sanitation. It is an interesting model to replicate, where the empowered women have had a big role. Conducting their own environmental impact assessment was very important and allowed them to ground their struggle and denunciations on objective data and rigorous analysis, bringing to the forth the very serious concerns of civil society and particularly women with regards to the water situation in the municipality.

The role of civil society is key in denouncing, monitoring and demanding respect for human rights. However, the organized society cannot and should not replace the role of the State. This case was presented at the Latin American

Water Tribunal, where the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry (MARN) was brought to account, and a resolution with a series of recommendations was issued by the jury. Reflecting on this court case presented to this Tribunal, Josefina Escamilla stated: "as women who fight for the human right to water, we will be on full alert to see that the recommendations are enforced."

Intimidation, persecution, criminalization of protests, and information restrictions have been everyday elements historically in the work of grassroots organizations defending human rights. Escamilla made reference to the failed attempts by Coca Cola representatives to silence the voices of struggle and protest: "They came three times to my home, offering me a new rebuilt house. When I asked what I had to give them in return, they said they wanted my signature accepting that the operation of new wells would not be detrimental for communities." With great energy, the 70-year-old woman leader said that she and the other women fighting against Coca Cola "would not be bought with a lunch or a house."

The consequences of giving priority to the industrial use of water over human consumption do not only impact on this right, but on other areas including gender-justice relations, the environment, food security, etc. However, other impacts are often difficult to prove with certainty, with many difficulties coming in the way. In the

face of this, it is important to dismantle corporate power and force transnational corporations to comply with standards all throughout their supply chains, and for them to ensure they implement all their commitments at all and every level of their economic process.

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## 2. Honduras. Women resisting the imposition of hydroelectric projects in La Paz Department

*Azalia Espinoza, Jazziel Baca and Martha Silva.*

### 2.1. Introduction

Latin America has become a key target for transnational corporations from the so called “developed” countries that extract raw materials to be exported to Europe and the US where they are processed and sold as their own products, thus establishing the binomial model of modern times, development and underdevelopment, as two sides of the same coin. In the case of Central America, this coin has been resonating in the speeches of all presidents since our nations were established in the second decade of the 19th Century

### 2.2. Background

Honduras is a rich country in terms of natural resources, biodiversity and minerals. However, this natural wealth is only enjoyed by a small percentage of society. Honduras holds the highest levels of inequality in Latin America: nearly 66 per cent of the population lives in poverty, according to official data from 2016. In rural areas, approximately 1 in every 5 Hondurans lives in extreme poverty conditions with less than US\$1.90 a day.

Under the premise of “development”, Honduras embarked in the 1990s on the deceitful extractivist model, but after the coup d’Etat of 2009 it became of even greater interest in the government

agenda. That same year, the government approved the General Water Law, which authorizes granting the country’s water resources in concession to private hands. Immediately after, the National Electricity Company (ENEE) started a bidding process for 47 projects (decree 100-1293/2009), 40 of which were awarded to foreign private companies (1). The General Mining Law was then passed through decree 238-2012 (2), which allows massive concessions of territories for the establishment of mining companies (metal and non-metal), and modifications to the Law on Electricity Generation with Renewable Resources, through decree 138-2013 (3) that allows the concession of rivers for the construction of hydroelectric dams in the country (4).

A new era of exploitation of commons and territorial looting was thus opened without any consultation, taking the form of mining, photovoltaic, wind energy and hydroelectric projects that have been on the rise non-stop since 2010, adding up to “more than 837 potential mining projects, which in territorial terms would mean almost 35% of the national territory. In addition, there are 76 hydroelectric projects that have completed a feasibility study and/or have an operation contract approved, in 14 of the country’s 18 departments (Atlántida, Colón, Comayagua, Copán, Cortés Francisco Morazán, Intibucá, La Paz, Lempira,

Ocotepeque, Olancho, Patuca, Santa Bárbara and Yoro)" (5). The Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) has stated that "one of the most relevant corruption networks is the one related to Public-Private Partnership concessions, particularly related to construction of public works including highways, toll stations and utility services such as electricity through the National Electricity Company (ENEE). It added that in the course of the concessions for hydroelectric projects there are strong indications that justify the need for MACCIH to conduct an investigation, because it is clear that there have been cases of corruption and that these can be proven with the accusations made by the Prosecutor's Office" (6).

On this regard, environmental, social and indigenous organizations have joined in opposition to these projects, but they have paid a high price: 123 activists have been murdered since 2009 for protecting their lands (7). In this context of persecution and murder, several organizations have joined efforts to resist, among them the Independent Indigenous Movement of La Paz - Honduras (MILPAH), conformed by indigenous men and women, established in 2010 to defend the Lenca communities in La Paz department. The MILPAH has been under permanent attack for opposing the construction of several of these hydroelectric dams.

In 2015, five environmental/human rights defenders were murdered in Santa Elena, for their awareness raising work and for upholding their human rights in

the context of mining and hydroelectric concessions affecting their ancestral lands (8). This prompted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to grant precautionary measures for 12 members of MILPAH.

On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight that most extraction projects are located in rural areas, where 60% of the Honduran population –composed by 8 ethnic groups (9)— is living or surviving, so it is the indigenous or afro descendant peoples who are directly suffering the inequality, plundering and repression brought about by these projects at social and environmental level, including through deforestation and pollution; or the lack of water sources, that has been demonstrated in several cases (10) of construction of hydroelectric dams in this era of extractivism in Honduras. However, there is an important sector within indigenous peoples who are the oppressed among the oppressed: the indigenous and Garifuna women (whether gay or heterosexual). They carry on their shoulders the immediate impacts of water scarcity as a result of hydroelectric projects, due to the roles imposed on them, since they are the ones who have been historically in charge of social reproduction tasks. This turns women into the main users of water, and when water is scarce, women are the ones who shoulder the responsibility to supply their families with this vital liquid, as told by several women organized in the Indigenous Councils and Water Boards, affected by hydroelectric dams in La Paz department.



*Construction of Corral de Piedras hydroelectric dam. Water was granted in concession to Energía de Occidente ENERCO company for 20 years.*

### **2.3. The struggle fought by women**

Organized women face many oppressions, struggles and resistance, since they fight against capitalist colonization, against patriarchy, which many times shares the space with the organizations where the work is carried out. The work of women has been made invisible, remains anonymous, they are always present, even though we do not see them.

The role historically forced on them by society is to reproduce the labor force. This role is not paid or even recognized, and this task turns women into the main users of water, and when water is scarce they are the ones who shoulder the responsibility

to supply families with this vital liquid, as María Lorenzo, member of MILPAH, living near one of the hydroelectric dams said: "I was affected ... because I live under this machine (in reference to the hydroelectric dam's turbine) and when I wanted to fight to take back our water I went to speak with Don Arnol, do you know what Don Arnol said? He shelved the petitions I gave him..." yes, grandma, we are going to give you [piped] water, don't you worry", and he left it at that and never gave me [piped] water. And how is he doing now? He is drinking clean water and we drink dirty water, muddy water, we have to bathe with muddy water. Requests, petitions, how many we submitted to him? Like three, and he shelved them ... he did not keep his word, and when they came (to



*Canal of Aurora I hydroelectric dam. Water was granted in concession to Inversiones La Aurora S.A. de C.V company for 30 years.*

measure before the construction works began)... some men came to my house ... he said "the dam will be built here, so you are going to live in a good house, in Granadilla" ... I am not from Granadilla, I will die here ... but you won't (be allowed to come in) ... "and what does your husband think?"... No, I think on my own because I am a woman! Look, when it gets muddy, we can't find any clean water" ... (11). Gladis García (12) said "the difference I felt in the community is the impact on water, there is no water, for example, (children) under five have diarrhea, fever, they are suffering now in San Francisco, I was there this morning ... I'm worried about other people who don't have water, they are drinking water from the river and that water is polluted, you know that all feces, dead animals and waste, all that pollution ends up in

the river, and sometimes people have to drink that water, wash with that water, bathe in that water, and I think that is what is making the children sick, who are now suffering from chronic diseases ... this is a dry area, there are no clean water wells, we get water from other communities in the high mountains".

Protecting the commons such as water has become the agenda of organized women, because they are the main affected. But they are paying a high price, however, from violent threats to psychological and physical attacks –with a strong emphasis on indigenous and Garifuna organized women, such as the case of Ana Miriam Romero (13)— to deaths, with 123 activists murdered for protecting their lands in 2009 (14), mostly men but also women from



*Interview with residents in San José Municipality about the impact of hydroelectric dams on their daily lives.*

organizations such as COPINH, including Paula Gonzales (2013), Berta Cáceres (2016) or Lesbia Yaneth Urquia (49 years old) murdered on July 6, 2016, mother of three and COPINH activist, who in 2009 became known as a strong defender of commons, opposing the construction of the Aurora I hydroelectric dam in San José municipality (15). Lesbia found herself in a distrustful context, in the framework of a "consultation" process conducted by the Honduran government for the approval of a bill to regulate the Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation mechanism" (16) on July 4-5 in Marcala, La Paz.

In this context of persecution and murder, the Independent Indigenous Movement of La Paz - Honduras (MILPAH) was created

in La Paz department, and it has been under permanent attack for opposing the construction of several the hydroelectric dams. "In 2015, five environmental and human rights defenders were murdered in Santa Elena for upholding their human rights in the context of mining concessions and hydroelectric dams affecting their ancestral lands" (17), prompting the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to grant precautionary measures for 12 members of MILPAH. Women organized in MILPAH have created their own spaces, but they have also achieved more participation within decision making and management structures. The degree of participation they have attained is such that in Simpinula community, the distribution of communal lands is done

independently from gender, so each man and woman has their own piece of land to work, and the work is done collectively.

In this sense, the participation of women in the struggle has been fundamental, as María Felicita Lopez, leader of MILPAH said; however, it can't be denied that women in many aspects are facing a strong crisis at all levels that affects them forcefully in different ways, including: unemployment, looting, differences with men's salaries, psychological violence, threats and harassment by the repressive forces of the State, discrimination, criminalization of the struggle, sexual violence and physical violence just for being considered inferior to men –all of this has forced many women to leave their homes and find a second job, which is added to their unpaid domestic work, so the working day of women has no end. This is the consequence of the failure of the few social policies implemented by the Honduran State and a result of the macho culture that prevails in the country.

Dam building has caused and is generating negative effects such as: increasing levels of poverty, violent repression by State security forces and the companies themselves, as well as criminalization of the social struggle; increasing rates of women murdered for defending the environment, increasing health impacts such as breathing and eye conditions resulting from the dust generated during construction, pollution of water resources and negative impacts on the livelihoods

and nutrition of the Lenca indigenous people.

## **2.4. Proposal**

Together with MILPAH and in the pursuit of social justice for indigenous women in the struggle, Movimiento Madre Tierra is working on enhancing the political advocacy capacities of women, both organized and non-organized, through permanent capacity building around issues such as: negotiation, human rights and particularly women rights, ILO convention 169 and political advocacy, promotion and support for free, prior and informed consultation spaces where women are significantly included, that is, that they take part in decision making regarding the organization, implementation and benefits of the consultations.

Movimiento Madre Tierra is also working with different social organizations (including feminist organizations) and decision makers, to build public policies that contribute to environmental protection and the dismantling of hydroelectric projects.

As Movimiento Madre Tierra, direct contact will be established with the Center for Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and their Families (CPTRT), to follow up on torture complaints in general and especially sexual abuse and other human rights violations suffered by women in the struggle, as well as women in general, that take place due to the prevailing negligence in the institutions, particularly the municipality, to deal with these kind of cases; people and especially women, are outraged because most cases, if not all, go unpunished. To get



this done, a group of women belonging to community councils organized by MILPAH will be trained, so they can be the ones who document and present the submissions to the CPTRT and the State institutions responsible for taking care of these cases.

## 2.5. Conclusions.

In the past years, the Honduran government, a neoliberal government, has thrown the country deeper into the economic model based on the unlimited exploitation of natural resources in the territories, especially indigenous territories, given their abundant natural wealth. By pursuing the exploitation of natural resources for private profits and capital accumulation, the State enters into conflicts with indigenous communities demonstrating against those projects, to which the State responds with the militarization of communities, human rights violations, criminalization of protests and the murder of environmental activists (123 people murdered since 2009).

In this scenario of conflicts, indigenous women have been the ones suffering not only for being women in a patriarchal and sexist society, but also for being indigenous women, something that goes hand in hand with being poor, rejected and discriminated. Lenca indigenous women suffer the direct consequences of looting and exploitation of territories, given that it is women who supply the household, so when communities protest against extractive projects, indigenous women are the ones leading the resistance.

Given the resistance of communities against these death projects, the proposal

is to enhance the political advocacy capacities of women, both organized and non-organized, through permanent training on issues such as negotiation, human rights and particularly women rights, and ILO convention 169 and political advocacy work to strengthen the indigenous resistance processes.

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(13) Ana Miriam Romero, Lenca indigenous woman, awarded with the "Front Line Defenders" Award in 2016. In October 2015, while pregnant, she was attacked by military officers and civilians for opposing the construction of the hydroelectric dam Los Encinos in La Paz. She is member of MILPAH and the San Isidro Indigenous Council since 2009.

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### 3. Costa Rica. Agribusiness and rural women: The case of pineapple plantations

*COECO Ceiba Friends of the Earth Costa Rica*

#### 3.1. Introduction.

The territorial conflicts that monoculture plantations bring about in Costa Rica have deep impacts in the daily lives, especially of women who are affected by agribusiness. In a country focused on open trade and signing Free Trade and investment protection agreements, the expansion of monoculture plantations has been the main phenomenon currently faced by rural communities, evidencing at the same time that those who bear the consequences are women, though they are also the ones who challenge and resist the expansion of agribusiness the most.

Understanding agribusiness in Costa Rica requires linking it to over thirty years of neoliberal policies of the past administrations. Since the FTA with the US entered into force (2008), the areas planted with oil palm, sugar cane, pineapple and bananas have increased. All of them are agricultural products for export that are not part of the daily food consumed by Costa Ricans, though they are displacing basic grain production and threatening peasant production, which has been losing State support since the 80s, and suffered severe blows from the neoliberal attacks of the following decades.



*Pineapple crops, Southern Area.*



*Xinia Briceño, community leader in Milano, Limón Province. Photo: Fabiola Pomareda.*

It is estimated that there are around 250 thousand hectares dedicated to agribusiness. Of these, 56 thousand are planted with Gold pineapple or MD2, the cultivation of which relies on technological packages based on agrottoxics such as Bromacil, Diuron, Endusolfan, Paraquat, Tiadimefon, Mocap, among others. In ten years (2007-2017), herbicide imports have grown by 312% (1), and the amount of water sources for human use that have been polluted by these agrottoxics is increasing. In 2017, over two water sources for human consumption were reported as polluted with Bromacil in the Northern Area, in Veracruz community,

San Carlos de Alajuela. This affected over 5000 people who drink water from that source (2).

Added to this, the disparities and discrimination experienced by women is a discussion that encompasses many aspects, including access to goods, economy of time, unpaid work, unemployment, low salaries, sexual violence and abuse, among others. The situation and suffering experienced by women in the countryside is a reflection of some of these types of gender-based submission that, in many cases, coincide

with the model promoted by the industrial food system.

According to the most recent Agricultural Census of Costa Rica (3), women only possess 8.1% of the arable land of the country, while men hold over 91.9%. Similarly, of the total 93,017 farms (property titles) in the country, 80,972 are owned by individuals (87%), while the rest (13%) are in the hands of private companies. Of those farms owned by individuals, 68,374 (84.4%) are run by men and only 12,598 farms (15.6%) are led by women.

This testifies to the fact that women have less access to property titles. In terms of the total acreage of all farms, women only own 4.4% of the arable land in the country. That means that women, on average, own farms that are much smaller than the properties held by men.

Still on this same track of exclusion, the technical assistance provided by the State is yet another area where disparities are to be found. These are exposed when analyzing further and interpreting the data provided by the Census, which show that farms run by women farmers receiving technical assistance from State or private institutions represent only 2.7% of the total, while those run by men amount to 17.1%. Undoubtedly, women experience a lack of protection in terms of access to capacity building and technical support. These data correspond to the national level and are not specific to pineapple farms, but they reflect the overall reality in terms of trends in agriculture. Further analysis and more research and field work are necessary to understand in detail the reality of women.

### **3.2. The impacts of pineapple monoculture plantations in the lives of women**

The situation of women in and around pineapple monoculture plantations is invisible for public institutions, even though changes in the daily lives of people living near plantations have been reported. For instance, in 2003, the National University's Regional Institute for Studies on Toxic Substances (IRET - UNA) reported for the first time the contamination of water with agrochemicals used in the production and post-harvest of pineapples for export. IRET concluded that the water supply in communities such as Milano, Cairo, Luisiana and La Francia was not appropriate for human consumption due to the presence of these agrochemicals. This has changed the daily lives of communities and especially of women completely. For 13 years now, a tank truck from the Aqueduct and Sewage Institute (Aya) has been delivering drinking water to these communities two or three times per week.

Not being able to use the tainted piped water has made the daily tasks of care (\*) more difficult to perform, including cooking, bathing, cleaning or childcare. Sadly, these care tasks fall almost exclusively on women, so it is fair and safe to say that this pollution has had a differentiated impact on women, making household workdays longer, and more complicated due to the need to fetch water in buckets, also meaning that more physical effort needs to be put to carry out these daily tasks. This should also be researched, given that there are no gender-based studies



*Erlinda Quezada, community leader in La Perla, Guacimo.*

on the impacts of pineapple monoculture plantations.

On the other hand, women have played the most prominent roles in the struggles against this monoculture. The National Front of Sectors Affected by Pineapple Production (FRENASAPP) is an organization made up mainly of women who play important leadership in the coordination of actions. They have been the first to organize themselves (before men) to fight against the polluting agroindustry. In addition, they have been key in finding solutions to the problems of erosion, pollution and land grabbing caused by pineapple

plantations. FRENASAPP is an open space of coordination that seeks to coordinate the efforts of communities affected by pineapple production. They struggle for life, for the defense of the right to a wholesome environment, to water, food, appropriate housing and land, to ensure natural resources for the generations to come. Large-scale pineapple production has had an impact on rights, because it has poisoned land and water, it has destroyed wildlife, displaced peasants from their lands and seriously injured food sovereignty, given that the land where food was previously grown, is now only planted with pineapples. In addition, in terms of



*Epidemiological study*

work conditions, labor guarantees are not respected and workers are not even allowed to unionize to defend their right to dignified employment.

In terms of the management of drinking water, women are also the ones looking for solutions to pollution. Community aqueducts led by women, such as the Milano aqueduct, have been some of the most active local organizations denouncing companies that do not respect environmental laws. It has even been women members of the local government who have proposed municipal moratoriums against the expansion of

pineapple plantations. An example of this is the councilor of Guacimo municipality, Erlinda Quesada.

In addition, the Association of Women United for the development of Africa (AMUDA), in the municipality of Africa de Guacimo, in Limon province, Costa Rica, was created in 2012 with the purpose of strengthening community organization and to defend natural resources. In Guacimo, they have been planted their plots with the aim to preserve and rescue the traditional medicine linked to tropical rainforests. This association has explored economic alternatives to monoculture plantations,

using agroecology and agroforestry techniques in their gardens and fields. Once again, these are issues that have only been scantily explored and researched. Due to their importance for strengthening community organization and in terms of the leadership of women on issues related to socioenvironmental conflicts, they should be of interest for academy and social organizations themselves.

### **3.3. Women-led community-based health care and research**

Women affected by pineapple plantations are not sitting back and waiting at the lack of action of State authorities and polluting companies. Now, in 2018, they are doing research with a community-based approach to know the health status of the communities surrounded by this monocrop.

Community-based health care is an approach that FRENASAPP is developing to identify, record and systematize the health effects of the exposure to pineapple agrotoxics. They want to prove that this industry is poisoning their health, to be able to denounce this at public level in order to stop its expansion.

This research is led by women researchers and community leaders who are working together in an innovative way to make the invisible visible. We cannot see the poison, but we see its impacts everywhere.

### **3.4. Conclusions**

These and other proposals developed, felt and thought by women in their own

spaces of resistance contribute to enrich the diversity of ways to defend the territory.

Through these experiences, women remind us, on one hand, that the struggle for the defense of territory is closely linked to sovereignty itself. In a context of rapid masculinization of all spaces, women suffer directly –and to a greater extent– the impacts of extractive activities such as monoculture plantations. Historically, women look for and recreate different ways to struggle and defend the territory, playing more active roles, joining forces to confront a common enemy that promotes looting.

On the other hand, women in resistance teach us to understand the territory as an integrated holistic space, where the impacts of extractive activities disrupt acutely the cycle of reproduction of life, the difficult regeneration of which falls on women's shoulders.

The defense of territory goes beyond this. It means questioning a Western, capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal development model that in its pursuit of organizing life around a supposedly limitless economic growth, has declared war on life itself.

Women therefore stand up as protagonists in resistance, overcoming the obstacles of a patriarchal society. These experiences signal the fact that women organized in the defense of land build a space of freedom from which they reclaim their



right to defend life, to speak with their own voices, to mobilize, resist and transform.

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(2) 5.000 people drink water containing Bromacil in Veracruz community, Pital, after pollution is detected <https://www.diarioextra.com/Noticia/detalle/350884/5000-personas-toman-agua-con-bromacil>

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#### Notes:

(\*) These tasks should not only fall on women in the family, they should be distributed more fairly. Sadly, gender dynamics in this society continue to be sexist, and therefore, they oppress women.

(\*) Henry Picado Cerdas. Biodiversity Coordination Network (RCB), a Coecoceiba Friends of the Earth supporter.

## 4. Guatemala. Impacts of sugarcane monoculture plantations on the lives of women in the Southern Coast

*Awex Mejia Cipriano, Elias Raymundo Raymundo  
Chimaltenango, Guatemala.*

### 4.1. Introduction

Nowadays, the big sugarcane producers gathered in the Association of Sugar Producers of Guatemala (ASAZGUA) boast about the 283,898.85 hectares planted with this crop, about the fact that Guatemala is, at Latin American and Caribbean level, the second largest producer, and at world level the fourth exporter and the third producer by volume per hectare; about the fact that sugar crops create 425,000 direct and indirect jobs, out of which 32,000 are sugarcane cutters, about sugarcane representing 3% of the national GDP and 15.36% of total exports of Guatemala, and also, about the fact that the sugarcane industry uses cane bagasse for producing 25% of the electricity in the National Interconnected System's (SNI) grid during the crop season, and that it is one of the main producers of alcohol in Central America (UNDP, 2016).

However, they hide the fact that their wealth is based on the exploitation of land and workforce, on land grabbing, on the destruction of biodiversity and the excessive use of water. They fail to disclose that most workers in the vast sugarcane plantations do not have written work contracts, making it impossible to clearly determine the duration of the contract, the nature of the job or the payment conditions, in addition to not having legal

benefits; they also fail to say that the workday of temporary workers is 12 hours long or even more, starting at four or five in the morning, depending on how far they live from the cutting area, which also determines the time at which they can go back to rest; and that the food, hygiene & sanitation and resting conditions are precarious and not adequate for the dignified reproduction of life (UNDP, 2016).

Overall, 90% of laborers earn a monthly salary that is below the minimum wage, and women earn the lowest salaries. Of the population that works in the agricultural sector, 94.7% do not have social security benefits, and child labor is common; there is no room for unionizing and the State is absent when it comes to labor inspections of the farms. (UNDP, 2016). And even less is done to ensure dignified living conditions for women. It has been reported that they are paid less than men to do the same job, they are treated in a humiliating way, they are not given time even to eat, and they are not given employment if they don't have sexual intercourse with the foreman in charge (Castro, N. 2017).

They also fail to mention that the vast extensions of sugarcane monocultures require enormous amounts of water, which is extracted from underground aquifers by building deep industrial wells

that dry up the artisanal wells of peasant communities. Shedding light on and denouncing the impacts of sugarcane monoculture plantations on the lives of women in the Southern Coast is CEIBA's main goal with this work, with the purpose of raising awareness on the actions and main demands of women.

#### 4.2. Background and conceptual framework

A monoculture is any large extension of land planted with a single species, which can be agricultural, forestry, cattle or hydrobiological. Today, one of the main monoculture plantations in Guatemala is sugarcane, around which there is a process of land concentration and grabbing, and an entire industry, services infrastructure and institutions for the purpose of selling it in export markets, with no regard whatsoever to the social and environmental conditions on which it is sustained or the impacts it generates.

But sugarcane as such –as a plant species– is not the problem. In the economy of many peasant families, sugarcane is part of their biodiverse strategy: it is used as a living barrier to prevent soil erosion and protect the borders of irrigation canals, in bean and corn fields, or cultivated in association with the many other crops in peasant lands; its juice is extracted to produce artisanal panela (raw brown sugar) and melcocha (raw sugarcane juice candy), it is the source of sugar to sweeten beverages or to cook or bake deserts and it is traded in regional markets. It is also used to feed cattle, and the population consumes it as natural juice or fruit.

In contrast to the biodiverse peasant economy, the big sugarcane industry has turned 278,880 hectares into monoculture plantations (INE, 2015) that are cultivated by approximately 2500 farmers, and thereafter processed and exported as sugar by the 12 sugar mills established in



1. Map of Guatemala

2. Surface planted with sugarcane in the Guatemalan coastal area. Images from <https://latierraesclava.eldiario.es/azucar/>

Guatemala, all of which are concentrated in the Southern Coast region (Melgar, 2011). The focus and efforts to build an economy based on this product is clearly observed in the fact that in 1960, only some 15,000 hectares were cultivated with this crop, thereafter escalating to 180,000 hectares in 2000, and to 230,000 hectares in 2010 (CENCIGAÑA, 2014). That is, an 18.6 fold increase in the surface planted to this crop in the span of 55 years.

In the second image, the light green strip depicts the area used to plant sugarcane in the Southern Coast of Guatemala (Retalhuleu, Sacatepequez, San Marcos and Santa Rosa), with no diversity of other crops and with excessive use of agrochemicals. The impacts on the territory –understanding it as the combined set of elements, that is, rivers, oceans, lakes, lagoons, soils, air, living beings (trees, plants, animals, humans) and the land surface with which humans interact and act on the territory— translate as loss of biodiversity, excessive use of water, pollution mainly caused by the use of agrotoxics, illegal expropriation of land and violent displacement of the population.

Sugarcane monoculture plantations cause serious impacts such as soil loss; burning of products (the smoke of which propagates over the whole territory, polluting the air for days); inadequate waste disposal ends up in rivers, flowing downstream to lower areas or the sea; large extensions of land in the hands of few people, in contrast to the scarce

amount of land afforded by most of the population, who in the best of cases have only a piece of land to build a house. In addition, the work at the farms tends to be exhausting and make workers sick, who lack appropriate medical attention, fostering the spread of diseases, such as gastrointestinal conditions, particularly in children.

### **4.3. Impacts of sugarcane plantations on women in Champerico communities**

Sugar cane monoculture plantations fence off and engulf communities in Cachuapán, la Gomera, Monte Cristo and El Triunfo, Champerico communities and Retalhuleu, in the Southern Coast of Guatemala. Two sugar mills are located next to these communities: Ingenio Magdalena and Ingenio El Pilar, both dedicated to the production, processing and commercialization of sugar at national and international level. Ingenio Magdalena is one of the biggest sugar producers and exporters in Central America.

The production and commercialization of sugar seems to be a good thing from the industry's point of view, however, the production system that they use has generated discontent in neighboring communities due to land use changes, an irrational use of chemical substances in cultivation that pollutes and degrades the soil and water, as well as the excessive use of water required for its production, oftentimes resulting in water shortages affecting communities.



*Sugarcane field next to the road to Champerico. Photo: Asociación CEIBA*

So sugarcane monoculture plantations have generated impacts on the population of neighboring communities, especially women, because they are the ones in charge, in most cases, of sowing and taking care of the crops and production in their diverse and wholesome gardens and plots, given that most men are working in the sugar mills and plantations, leaving their own crops and production unattended. In contrast to the vast extensions of sugarcane monocultures, the small peasant fields or plots and/or gardens in the communities are highly diversified, with around 25 plant species including vegetables, fruit trees and medicinal plants, with the main goal of producing for household consumption, and selling surpluses within the community only when they occur.

Similarly, and in stark contrast with the agrochemical management of sugarcane monocultures, crops in the communities are fertilized with manure and protected with organic insecticides and herbicides, produced from local plants by the families. As a way of resisting intensive monoculture plantations, groups of women decided several years ago to work for the protection of the land and in cultivation of organic products. "Plants, herbs and other crops such as maize and beans are important in the lives of women, we are maize and we cannot eat other type of food but our own", said Maria Santos.

The lack of water is a constant concern for women that has been growing due to the sugar mills, because they don't have



*Plot run by Maria Santos in Monte Cristo community. Photo: Asociación CEIBA*

enough water to manage their crops, and the little water they have is polluted. This results in women having to look for other means to supply their families with nutritious food, and being forced to buy vegetables in the local market, travelling for several hours and spending their scarce economic resources on transportation.

This situation forces them to sell their backyard animals to buy the food they don't have and need, thus increasing their workload due to a culturally pre-established role that points at them as the ones in charge of providing food for the family. The women in la Gomera, Monte Cristo, Cachuapan and El Triunfo in Champerico, Retalhuleu claim that the wells have dried up or that they don't have enough water, because the Magdalena and El Pilar sugar mills use machinery to divert the rivers to use them

in their production process, leaving a very small part for the use of the neighboring communities. Women say that in the past, the artisanal water wells were not so deep, however, now they have had to dig deeper and deeper to find water, and that in some cases they haven't found water, only dry wells.

Also, the women state that this situation affects them in the activities they carry out within their homes. They are the ones in charge of ensuring that the family has access to water for personal use, washing and preparing the food, washing clothes and dishes, and also to ensure that there is enough water to be used and consumed by the children and husbands. They state that these problems are getting worse.

In addition to water scarcity, the little water they have is polluted with the

chemicals used in the mornings in the plantations to ripen the production, and the ashes generated as a result of burning of sugarcane, that have caused skin conditions (rashes) in women, since they are the ones most exposed to open spaces, since they have to grind nixtamal, leave their children at school, or when they go to work on their gardens or plots, which are activities they undertake in the morning to make the best use of their time. Likewise, the polluted water has caused gastrointestinal diseases in children, who tend to be the most vulnerable, and that due to culturally imposed patterns, the task of taking care of them and creating the necessary conditions for the children to recover falls on women. There is also an increasing presence of flies and mosquitoes, causing dengue and the contamination of food, which is mostly eaten by pregnant women and children, affecting their immune systems and potentially leading to malnutrition, mainly in pregnant women.

Another effect of the sugarcane monoculture plantations is the severe damage to the crops of peasant gardens and plots caused by aerial sprayings, which take place from 6 to 9 am in the morning over large extensions of sugarcane plantations, falling as well over the crops of the nearby houses and causing fruits and vegetables to ripen and fall before the natural point of harvest, which has caused serious crop losses, mainly sesame, avocado, cucumber, papaya, mango and tomato, leading to significant economic losses. One family in la Gomera reported losses of up to US\$ 3,750.00 in one year because of this.

This puts limitations on the possibility to grow food for their homes and the local market. Local women express concern because they used to sell tropical fruits as a means to generate income for their families, however, the situation is causing more poverty in families, which means, according to women's testimonies, that they have to limit the food they give to their families, while resulting also in an additional burden because they have to find other means to supply their families with nutritious food, often at unaffordable costs, in addition to the fact that there are single women or widows amongst them in charge of ensuring the access of food to their families and who find themselves in an even more constrained situation.

Added to this are the consequences of burning sugarcane, which takes place every season in the production process that lasts from 4 to 6 months, including harvest when the sugarcane is cut. Pollution caused by smoke and ashes is what the beginning of the planting season means for the environment, women and community life in Champerico.

In Retalhuleu, the roads are often polluted with waste piling up on them, and they also get damaged due to the constant passing of trucks loaded with sugar cane. Even on the international highway, trucks are transporting the cut cane to the sugar mills for processing, limiting the flow of public transportation, generating heavy traffic at all hours and restricting the mobility of women to carry out their multiple activities, forcing them to walk long hours because of the distances, generating extra physical fatigue on them,



*Women in Monte Cristo describing the consequences of sugar cane on their lives.  
Photo: Asociación CEIBA*

in addition to the one from their daily activities.

In response to this situation they experience on a daily basis, the women in communities are demanding their rights and access to sufficient and quality water. Women claim that water is a communal resource that allows them to live in harmony with themselves and with each other, and produce their own quality food. They state that as women and as those most affected, they have carried out actions in the area, meeting with the managers of the sugar mills to tell them the damage caused by sugarcane and its production process. They have shown them the quantitative losses caused by the sugar mills, and have requested them

to take responsibility for this situation and to compensate the community for the losses. Without taking any responsibility, but pretending to do something for the communities, the owners of the sugar mills are using the following strategies:

- 1) "contributing" to the community, such as with machine hours to repair the gravel roads in la Gomera
- 2) offering sheets and medical clinics in Monte Cristo and
- 3) generating jobs in Cuchupatan and El Triunfo.

In most cases, communities have not given in to these petty offers, but have



reaffirmed their fundamental interest to have access to water and communities free from chemical pollution and waste. Despite their double workday and the daily activities in their homes, which is unpaid work, the women are increasingly participating in community organization processes that open doors for them to get training and acquire production abilities such as working on their gardens in the framework of ancestral production practices that many times have been taken away. In addition, the organization and capacity building spaces allow them to form themselves, to learn and analyze the reality and their rights and build new ways and tools to confront the owners of the sugarcane agroindustry and monoculture plantations.

The detrimental effects of sugarcane monocultures on the lives of women has led them to defend their rights and participate permanently in dialogue roundtables, workshops, fora and conferences that allow them to express and shed light on the impacts of monocultures on their lives and the lives of their communities, with the participation of public figures such as MPs, mayors and teachers, and similarly, to create networks with private institutions in defense of the environment and their rights.

In joining this process and as contribution to it, CEIBA Friends of the Earth Guatemala is promoting the implementation of agroecological gardens, in order to counteract the loss of harvests and spread the use of manure and organic herbicides and insecticides in the different communities in order to raise awareness

on cheaper agroecological techniques that allow to nurture the land and have an environmentally friendly production. In order to conduct better targeted advocacy work, participatory analysis of the impacts caused by monoculture plantations with the affected population is promoted, in order to raise awareness and unite efforts in the interest of the community as a whole. Community organization is also strengthened in defense of their rights, mainly the access to lands, water and areas free from monoculture plantations.

#### **4.4. Conclusions**

- ESugarcane monoculture plantations in Guatemala continue to expand, taking large extensions of land and displacing the population from its territory and deepening further land grabbing processes.
- The system of production and harvest of sugarcane has caused negative impacts, especially on the lives of women, for instance limiting access to water, gastrointestinal diseases, material losses on roofs and houses, and damages in gardens and plots.
- Community members and women have their own community organization, are empowered and have made the decision to dialogue, denounce and demand their rights, which are violated by monocultures and the voracious appetite for money displayed by the owners of sugarcane monocultures and agroindustry, who insist on keeping women in a passive,

submissive and sedentary role, locked away, with no opportunities to develop their full potential as human beings.

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**CESTA**



**Amigos de  
la Tierra  
El Salvador**

**CESTA Amigos de la Tierra El Salvador:**  
Km 4 ½ Carretera a San Marcos No. 392

**Dirección Postal:**

Apartado Postal 3065, San Salvador, El Salvador, Centroamérica

**Correo Electrónico:**

[cesta@cesta-foe.org.sv](mailto:cesta@cesta-foe.org.sv)

**Página Web:**

[www.cesta-foe-org.sv](http://www.cesta-foe-org.sv)

**Teléfonos:**

(503) 2213-1400, 2213-1401 y 2213-1444

