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# Community communication: grassroots journalism at risk

There are a range of media outlets in the current information society in which we live, however on many occasions they do not necessarily reflect diverse perspectives and rich points of view that are essential for rule of law. Guatemala could be an example of this according to *Centro Cívitas*<sup>1</sup>, "it is a country where there is no stopping the interests of media owners (...), who politicians serve in exchange for bribes or to obey direct orders. The lack of modernizing laws and the absence of policies (...) to put into practice freedom of expression, due to the media owners interests, coupled with the lack of interest of public employees ensure compliance of current laws. Thus favoring the phenomena of concentration of media ownership."<sup>2</sup>

Some of the effects of this situation are restrictions to freedom of expression and press, like censorship and self-censorship, the domination of some media, several cases of corruption, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The organization Reporters without Borders confirms that in 2014 attacks on journalists and communicators in Guatemala have increased in a climate of almost complete impunity<sup>4</sup>. A large disequilibrium in transmission of information has been maintained because the news media that has the most coverage in the country is concentrated in a few hands which makes it a threat for pluralism of information. The organization also speaks out against the rise in cases of criminalization of journalist and communicators and the risk community radio stations run of being shut down due to lack of legal status<sup>5</sup>. This article aims to present the work of community based communicators and the risks of this line of work in Guatemala.

## Raise the voice of indigenous peoples

Community media outlets like community radio transmit information about the situation of indigenous peoples and the problems they face. Rony Morales, communications coordinator for Union of Campesino Organizations of Verapaz (UVOC), defines himself as a community-based, alternative, social communicator. He explains that community-based communicators, **"stand with the people, work for and with the people, and speak of topics that interest the communities. They communicate using their own language, own culture, and own cosmovision with communities"**<sup>6</sup>. Community-based communicators state that community communication is a two-way process. Their goal is not to solely transmit news to people, but that there be an interchange with the population so that the population can participate and give feedback on the news that is broadcasted<sup>7</sup>. The community-based media outlets are a tool of empowerment, training and education for communities.

Norma Sancir, community-based communicator for Campesino Central Coordinator New Day' Chortí (CCCND), says she started working in community-based media when she observed that the rights of indigenous communities are violated and corporate media was not interested in reporting on these issues. She denounces that **"mass corporate media are financed and backed by business interests"** and they do not report on violations of the rights of indigenous peoples. She goes on to say that an article on these topics could affect their own business interests, putting at risk the logic behind the current development model in Guatemala that is promoted by the business sector who finances these media outlets<sup>8</sup>.

1 Centro Cívitas is an alliance of organizations working with media on social and human rights in Guatemala.

2 OBSERVACOM, Centro Cívitas, "Panorama de la concentración de la propiedad de los medios en Guatemala", septiembre 2014, <http://observacom.org/panorama-de-la-concentracion-de-la-propiedad-de-los-medios-en-guatemala/>

3 Ibid.

4 The situation has maintained critical during the first half of 2015 with the assassination of three journalist in March in the department of Suchitepéquez. See: [https://www.ifex.org/guatemala/2015/03/16/villatoro\\_killed/es/](https://www.ifex.org/guatemala/2015/03/16/villatoro_killed/es/)

5 Reporters without Borders, "Guatemala - Clasificación mundial de la libertad de prensa 2015", [index.rsrf.org/#/index-details/GTM](http://index.rsrf.org/#/index-details/GTM)

6 Interview with Rony Morales, member of UVOC, 07.07.2015.

7 Interview with Norma Sancir, member of Campesino Central Coordinator New Day' Chortí (CCCND), 07.13.2015.

8 Interview with Norma Sancir, Op. cit.

## The struggle to capture public space

In this context media outlets like community radios are political actors that compete with mainstream media to capture public space and transmit the reality they observe in their communities, contradicting the vision promoted by corporate media.

*Cara y Señal* magazine explains it like this: **“The mass media are places of social conflict – they are one of the places of privilege in the cultural battle.** They are spaces of confrontation between different interpretations within society; they are spaces where transformation or reproduction are encouraged. (...) This is the context in which you can think of community radios as political, cultural actors with the capacity to serve as spaces for gathering men and women, (...) with the capacity to demonstrate that another way of life is possible and with the capacity to build this everyday”<sup>9</sup>. One of the objectives of community-based media is inform and raise awareness in the population to break down the barriers of the mass media and generate structural changes in the long-term.



Norma Sancir, communicator of CCCND, Matasano, Chiquimula. Photo: PBI 2015

## Working against the tide

Working with community-based media outlets and broadcasting information that goes against the predominant discourse of mainstream media is not an activity free from risks. Norma Sancir, of CCCND, explains how working in a social organization that defends human rights entails “working against the tide”, her work is not recognized nor validated by State institutions nor by corporate media. For example, community radios are sometimes called “pirated radio stations.” She is disgusted by the attacks on the right to freedom of expression, stating **“all of the people who participate in community-based media – informing communities, telling the truth and defending freedom of expression – are being criminalized, censored and threatened for telling the truth”**<sup>10</sup>.

## Attacking who? Camera shots do not kill<sup>11</sup>.

Norma Sancir talks from experience as she has suffered criminalization for her work as a community-based communicator with CCCND. In this position she has presented a variety of topics that affect the local population like the right to food, gender equality, or the violation of Ch’orti’ communities in the imposition of hydropower projects in the municipalities of Camotán and Jocotán in the department of Chiquimula.

For this reason on September 18, 2014 she was present at the Jupilingo Bridge in the municipality of Camotán, where the National Civil Police (PNC) violently broke up the protest that took place during a national strike. As a communicator, she went to cover the story and took photos of what was happening, then members of the PNC detained her and accused her of “attacking and public disorder”. She was jailed for five days along with another CCCND leader and three people from Cho’rti’ communities who were present during the events. The five detained people were freed on September 22 due to lack of evidence<sup>12</sup>. Norma Sancir, who had only gone to the Jupilingo Bridge to document and report on the events, denounced the stigmatization and criminalization that she suffered because she does not work for a renowned media outlet. She adds that the mainstream media outlets did not support her, instead they slandered her, calling her a “pseudo journalist”, “leader” or “trouble maker”<sup>13</sup>.

9 Revista *Cara y señal*, número 3, “La revolución es un sueño eterno”, 2005, <https://radioformateca.wordpress.com/2013/11/02/que-es-una-radio-comunitaria/#more-432>

10 Interview with Norma Sancir, Op. cit.

11 Ibid.

12 See PBI Alert «Creciente cierre de espacios para la defensa de derechos humanos: Central Campesina Campesina Ch’orti’ Nuevo Día y las Doce Comunidades Kakchikeles de San Juan Sacatepéquez», Guatemala, octubre 2014, <http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/>

13 Interview with Norma Sancir, Op. cit.

### Censorship of Snuq' Jolom Konob' community radio in Santa Eulalia

Another type of aggression against community-based media is censorship like that suffered by Snuq' Jolom Konob' community radio station in Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango, since January 20, 2015.

Snuq' Jolom Konob' community radio station commemorated 15 years of operation in December 2014. According to Lorenzo Mateo Francisco, social communicator and member of the radio's board of directors, "(the radio) has worked to benefit the community transmitting both the needs of the population and to spread culture"<sup>14</sup>. The radio has also covered problems related to the defense of territory and natural resources. It covered conflicts generated by the implementation of hydro-power project of the Hidro Santa Cruz company. The organization Reporters without Borders states that «media coverage of the defense of ancestral land by native peoples upset local authorities who favored the installation of the business»<sup>15</sup>.

On January 19, 2015 a contingent of PNC riot police entered the village of Pojom in San Mateo Ixtatan. They searched homes and detained two community leaders. The town elders, the population of Santa Eulalia and neighbors from other municipalities united to request the liberation of the two leaders<sup>16</sup>. Lorenzo Mateo Francisco and the team of communicators at Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio were reporting on the events the entire day. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, Lorenzo Mateo Francisco was informed that the two people had been injured by gunfire which seemed to involve the mayor of Santa Eulalia. Lorenzo and two of his colleagues went to open the radio. When they arrived, a group of the mayor's sympathizers attacked them and would not let them enter the building. Later that day, those people placed a padlock on the door and since then the radio has been closed and consequently censored<sup>17</sup>.

On March 19, two months after the forced closing of the radio station, there was an organized public event to reopen Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio with the presence of community elders, representatives from civil society, national and international

journalist and communicators. However, the mayor of Santa Eulalia and his supporters did not allow the radio to reopen. They intimidated the communicators by taking away their cameras, insulting, and hitting them<sup>18</sup>. Reporters without Borders was alarmed by these violent acts and affirms this incident is "representative of the hostile attitude of Guatemalan authorities in the face of media and more specifically community radios"<sup>19</sup>. At the time of writing this article the Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio's facility is still closed. However, the radio is still transmitting its program online.

### When the State does not hear the clamor of communicators

For Maria Estela López Funes, lawyer with the Human Rights Law Firm, who defends several Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio communicators, in this case the right to inform and to be informed has been violated. She comments that the Guatemalan Constitution guarantees the right of indigenous peoples to inform and to be informed as does the Peace Accords, and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 and other international laws. According to the lawyer, the heart of the matter goes back to the social struggle against the hydroelectric project in Santa Eulalia in which people favor environmental and water conservation. She also states that the justice system in Guatemala many times does not respond to the clamor of human rights defenders, nor the clamor of communicators. There is a problem of criminalizing social struggles on behalf of the State: **"The State is criminalizing social struggles. Why? Because these leaders are a bother and constitute a barrier to the interests of the oligarchy. In some cases community leaders have been physically eliminated or detained. What for? To silence their voice and so that no one learns of their just claim."**<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the legislation that regulates the media's activities disfavors community-based media. To this effect in 2012, Congress enacted reforms to the Telecommunications Law which consolidated the strong concentration of the Guatemalan media landscape, strengthened the position of news

14 Interview with Lorenzo Mateo Francisco, member of Snuq' Jolom Konob' radio, 08.21.2015.

15 Reporters without Borders, «Reprimen a la radio comunitaria Snuq Jolom Konob en Guatemala», marzo 2015, <http://es.rsf.org/guatemala-reprimen-a-la-radio-comunitaria-26-03-2015,47733.html>

16 Press release from community radio Snuq' Jolom Konob' in Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango, 01.30.2015, <https://comunitariapress.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/comunicado-de-la-radio-comunitaria-snuq-jolom-konob-de-santa-eulalia-huehuetenango/>

17 Interview with Lorenzo Mateo Francisco, Op. cit.

18 Ibid.

19 Reporters without Borders, March 2015, Op. Cit.

20 Interview with María Estela López Funes, member of Human Rights Law Firm, 08.21.2015.

media that already held frequency concessions, but did not normalize the situation of community-based media outlets. All of this took place despite, the 2011 report of the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, reiterated its recommendation to the State of Guatemala to promote, “in conditions of equality and no discrimination, the access to different groups the frequencies and licenses for radio and television, whatever the technical modality”<sup>21</sup>. When the State does not provide specific legal protection, (community-based communicators) are left in a vulnerable situation, running the risk of being closed or that their equipment be confiscated<sup>22</sup>.

### Popular communication: a tool of empowerment

Despite all of the threats and repression that community-based communicators suffer, they are determined to raise awareness in youth of social problems that affect indigenous communities as well as train them in community-based communications. For this reason UVOC and CCCND are training indigenous Q’eqchis’, Poqomchi’, Achi’ and Ch’orti’ youth in popular communication respectively. These schools empower communities and in the long-term, “people from the communities will make news, have their own media outlets, and have a stake in the media”<sup>23</sup>. For example, UVOC is organizing several communication schools for youth where they teach them what communication is, the differences between popular communication and commercial communication, who are the owners of mainstream media, rights of communicators, and other topics related to the technical components of media production. In addition,

they will work on the development of critical thinking skills so that they youth can learn to question preconceived ideas, question unjust situations facing their communities, and create constructive debates that allow them to understand the political context. Youth will create their own discourse as to not simply reproduce the discourse of mainstream media<sup>24</sup>. The struggle to promote structural changes is an integral part of work in community-based communication, as Rony Morales states the challenge of UVOC is to, “**see how through communication more land can be recuperated - territories will be recuperated through a struggle without arms but with words – that is to say and that the Q’eqchi’ and Poqomchi’ nations be freed from colonist ways that still exist**”<sup>25</sup>.



Community-based communicators in Sayaxché, Péten. Photo: PBI 2015

21 CIDH, Informe Anual de la CIDH 2011. Volumen II. Informe de la Relatoria Especial para la Libertad de Expresión, p.126, [http://corpusiuristransparenciadai.ifai.org.mx/contenido/CorpusIuris\\_Precedentes/Comisi%C3%B3nIDH%20RELE%202011.pdf](http://corpusiuristransparenciadai.ifai.org.mx/contenido/CorpusIuris_Precedentes/Comisi%C3%B3nIDH%20RELE%202011.pdf)

22 Reporters without Borders, March 2015, Op. cit.

23 Interview with Rony Morales, Op. cit.

24 Ibid.

25 Según el diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española (RAE): «Sistema de explotación de las tierras por medio de colonos».

26 Interview with Rony Morales, Op. cit.

# The defense of the Merendón and Granadillas Mountains: a peaceful struggle for water

“La Trementina, a campesino community that has always demanded their right to water and rights surrounding this issue, is currently at a standstill in regards to their struggle due to harm caused to their organization and social fabric.”

Reverend José Pilar Álvarez Cabrera, member of the Social and Ecumenical Coordinator for the Defense of Life in Zacapa and Chiquimula in the Macizo del Merendón

Different entities, communities, and people have worked for years to protect the ecosystem of the Merendón and Granadillas Mountains in the Departments of Chiquimula and Zacapa. The main water reserves and natural diversity are located in this region. This defense stands up to illegal logging, large land extensions dedicated to cattle and monoculture and consequently deforestation. The mountain is critical to the lives of more than three hundred thousand inhabitants because the main water sources are located there. It is important to note that water resources are scarce in this area. Those defending water and territory in the area have set forth the goal of declaring Merendón and Granadillas Mountains protected areas. Among the communities involved in these efforts is La Trementina, Zacapa, one of the most affected communities.

This process is a clear example of a peaceful struggle in defense of the right to water. At the same time the context in which it develops demonstrates lots of inconsistencies in the national and international legal framework that regulate this right. The geographical setting of La Trementina and other communities in the Central American Dry Corridor<sup>1</sup> and the different interests that surround the issue of access and use of water and other natural resources make for a complicated situation.

PBI has accompanied the process to defend Merendón Mountains since 2008, while accompanying the Association for the

defense of Las Granadillas Mountain (APMG) until October 2013. Since the founding of the Ecumenical Coordinator<sup>2</sup> in July 2013, PBI has provided constant observation of their activities. The people who work in defense of economic, social and environmental rights in the area, have suffered diverse types of persecution and threats. These include legal cases against them which have been dismissed. The harassment started after they denounced illegal commercial logging and started a permanent social audit of intended licenses and logging on private lands in the mountain.

Throughout this article we will outline different factors that make up the complex context in which the human rights of communities and defenders of the region are violated.

## Access to water, a human right

There is currently both national and international legal framework that provide for the basic needs of people and communities among those is the access to water. Since 1977 there have been conferences, convention, resolutions, summits, etc. that have recognized this right. In 2010<sup>3</sup> the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 64/292<sup>4</sup> and the Human Rights Council passed Resolution 15/9<sup>5</sup> which recognize access to clean water and sanitation as a human right. Fortunately these affirmations have extended to multiple contexts through a variety of international instruments that specify their implications and

1 Arid region in Central America that starts in Guatemala in the Departments of Chiquimula, Zacapa, Jalapa and Jutiapa ending in Nicaragua.  
2 Social and Ecumenical Coordinator for the Defense of Life in Zacapa and Chiquimula in the Macizo del Merendón is made of churches, organizations, indigenous Ch'orti, campesino communities of Zacapa and Chiquimula.  
3 ONU, El derecho humano al agua y al saneamiento. Hitos de las Naciones Unidas: El derecho al agua y el saneamiento, [http://www.un.org/spanish/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human\\_right\\_to\\_water\\_and\\_sanitation\\_milestones\\_spa.pdf](http://www.un.org/spanish/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human_right_to_water_and_sanitation_milestones_spa.pdf)  
4 Asamblea General Naciones Unidas. Res. 64/292, 3 de agosto de 2010, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292&Lang=S](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/64/292&Lang=S)  
5 Consejo de Derechos Humanos. Res. 15/9, 6 de octubre de 2010, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/166/36/PDF/G1016636.pdf?OpenElement>

reach. Of particular importance is General Comment No. 15 adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which specifies that access to water should be “sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable for personal and domestic uses”<sup>6</sup>. It also recognizes water as an economic right for the production of other goods and declares the allotment of water should be prioritized for personal and domestic uses.<sup>7</sup>

Guatemala has ratified treaties that recognize obligations surrounding the right to water and its national legislation has protective instruments.

As a State party,<sup>8</sup> Guatemala would be violating this right if by action or omission it does not adopt measures to guarantee the full enjoyment of water, national policy on potable water and sanitation and laws that safeguard the reduction of water resources that would affect health and life<sup>9</sup>. Guatemala not only has a National Policy on Potable Water and Sanitation Sector but also national guidelines implemented by the Executive branch and also the right to water is indirectly covered in the Constitution<sup>10</sup>. Thus it is clear that the legal framework to recognize water as a human right exists. Unfortunately, the lack of specific legislation on this right along with the geographic conditions provoke a series of vulnerable situations that negatively affect the Guatemalan population<sup>11</sup>.

### Water management, a challenge for Guatemala

The State of Guatemala’s water management sets forth diverse challenges and problems due in part to the scarcity of the resource in some regions of the country. Furthermore, Guatemala does not have an ordinary law that regulates the use<sup>12</sup>, although to date 30 bills<sup>13</sup> have been presented. The companies that provide water limit their services to county seats and on the community level there are Water Councils made up of neighbors who usually are registered under the Community



Macizo del Merendón, a zone with the largest quantities of water resources in the region, Department of Chiquimula. Photo: PBI 2015.

Development Council (COCODE). Never-the-less at the community level one can observe a certain lack of articulated norms that regulate the behavior of the providers and serve as the basis to sanction pre-established obligations when challenged<sup>14</sup>. This legal vacuum prohibits good management of water resources, regardless of their use.

All of these factors represent a risk for communities located in rural areas, especially for those located in the eastern part of the country who are notorious for water scarcity that provokes severe drought. The Eastern part of Guatemala is part of the Central American Dry Corridor which makes water resources and food security a concern<sup>15</sup>. In the Departments of Zacapa, Chiquimula, Jalapa and Jutiapa, the problems of availability and deficient environmental management contribute substantially to the conditions of environmental insecurity and lack of governability<sup>16</sup>.

6 Observaciones Naciones Unidas. Comité DESC. Observación General N° 15, El derecho al agua, [http://conf-dts1.unog.ch/1%20SPA/Tradutek/Derechos\\_hum\\_Base/CESCR/00\\_1\\_obs\\_grales\\_Cte%20Dchos%20Ec%20Soc%20Cult.html#GEN15](http://conf-dts1.unog.ch/1%20SPA/Tradutek/Derechos_hum_Base/CESCR/00_1_obs_grales_Cte%20Dchos%20Ec%20Soc%20Cult.html#GEN15)

7 Ibid.

8 Party State, a State that has signed and ratified an accord, convention, treaty or international declaration so that it will be in effect in its territory

9 OACNUDH Guatemala, Boletín 21, 2011. [http://www.cc.gob.gt/ddhh2/docs/Boletines/boletin\\_21.pdf](http://www.cc.gob.gt/ddhh2/docs/Boletines/boletin_21.pdf)

10 PDH, EL acceso al agua como un derecho humano en Guatemala. Guatemala, 2014 [http://www.pdh.org.gt/archivos/descargas/Investigacin%20en%20DDHH/Notas%20Conceptuales/el\\_acceso\\_al\\_agua\\_potable\\_como\\_un\\_derecho\\_humano\\_en\\_guatemala.pdf](http://www.pdh.org.gt/archivos/descargas/Investigacin%20en%20DDHH/Notas%20Conceptuales/el_acceso_al_agua_potable_como_un_derecho_humano_en_guatemala.pdf)

11 Gobierno de Guatemala, Política Nacional del Sector de agua y saneamiento, [http://www.segeplan.gob.gt/downloads/clearinghouse/politicas\\_publicas/Salud/Politica\\_Nacional\\_del\\_Sector\\_de\\_Agua\\_Potable\\_y\\_Saneamient.pdf](http://www.segeplan.gob.gt/downloads/clearinghouse/politicas_publicas/Salud/Politica_Nacional_del_Sector_de_Agua_Potable_y_Saneamient.pdf)

12 Lentini, E., *Servicios de agua potable y saneamiento en Guatemala: beneficios potenciales y determinantes de éxito*, julio de 2010, p. 21-22, [http://www.bivica.org/upload/agua-saneamiento\\_guatemala.pdf](http://www.bivica.org/upload/agua-saneamiento_guatemala.pdf).

13 PDH, *Op. Cit*

14 Mendez Lorena, K., *Medidas de adaptación a la sequía implementadas por comités de agua ubicados en el corredor seco de Guatemala*. Costa Rica, 2014, p. 14-20, [http://repositorio.bibliotecaorton.catie.ac.cr/bitstream/11554/7143/1/Medidas\\_de\\_adaptacion\\_a\\_la\\_sequia.pdf](http://repositorio.bibliotecaorton.catie.ac.cr/bitstream/11554/7143/1/Medidas_de_adaptacion_a_la_sequia.pdf)

15 Van der Zee Arias, A., van der Zee, J., Meyrat, A., Poveda, C., Picado, L., *Estudio de caracterización del Corredor Seco Centroamericano*, diciembre de 2012, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/tomo\\_i\\_corredor\\_seco.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/tomo_i_corredor_seco.pdf)

16 Naciones Unidas, *Fortalecimiento de la gobernabilidad ambiental ante los riesgos climáticos en Guatemala*, <http://www.onu.org.gt/contenido.php?ctg=1584-1583-1339-for-tambiente>

### La Trementina community and their struggle for water

The panorama describing issues related to access to water in Guatemala in which there are deficiencies in the State system and the complicated circumstances of drought in the Eastern part of the country generate a series of difficulties and tensions in which the role of human rights defenders becomes the struggle for the right to water. The situation lived in La Trementina is a clear example of how convergence of all of these factors generate conflict derived from grave human rights violations. This community has been suffering excessive deforestation and on occasion illegal deforestation of trees in the Granadillas mountain where water reserves and the areas natural diversity are located, provoking the reduction of natural resources, affecting the quantity and quality of water and thus the quality of life of the population. Given that La Trementina community is located in an arid zone, trees are a fundamental resource of incalculable value that have to be protected. Given the poor use and lack of protection of this natural resource this is the origin of social conflict that has resulted in the rupture of the social fabric in the community. As a solution to this problem, different social actors started a process to defend the right to water in the communities of the area, organizing themselves into APMG during the first decade of the 21st century to promote the declaration of Las Granadilla Mountain as a protected area. They organized with the technical support of the organization Madre Selva. Despite having put forth a bill for the protection of Las Granadillas Mountain in January 2011, they have not been given a response<sup>17</sup>. They have had to face various attempts of criminalization<sup>18</sup>, as well as different types of attacks and threats including destruction of water lines that provide water to La Trementina community which has greatly affected the quality of life of the population, the organization and the social fabric of the community.

PBI's accompaniment of defenders of water and natural resources in the region has allowed us to have direct dialogue and greater knowledge of the problems described. One of the defenders is Reverend José Pilar Álvarez Cabrera, who in the following interview speaks of the situation affecting La Trementina community.

### What is your assessment of the current situation in the region and specifically in the community of La Trementina?

The level of conflict has increased. La Trementina community is divided and currently there is no one defending human rights. The deforestation, of the forests near the water source in the mountain that provides water for at least 12 communities of Zacapa, is ongoing in an arbitrary manner with full impunity. This has serious implications – the water flow has decreased and there is not enough water for all of the families, producing a food crisis. Communities are desperate.

### What are the social impacts of this situation?

The division and rupture of the social organizational fabric in the communities is evident. Thus there is a lack of order and chaos in the use and management of natural assets and services in the mountains, mainly in the water sources. It is terrible because the population is not being guaranteed their right to water. Now communities are at the disposition of private land owners because the community lost this authority that unity gives them. Now they are simply neighbors and each to their own – they are unable to unite for a common cause.

### How do you assess the respect of the right to water in your region?

La Trementina's Water Committee and a few neighbors who collaborate with landowners were the ones who agreed to exploit logging in the area. They did this by singling out and threatening the defenders in the community. The large land owners placed two doors with pad locks at the point of passage to the communities and now they are forbidding access to water. Only the Committee who has an agreement with the local land owners can pass through the area. This is of concern because they did not consult the community. This is an action that prohibits the right to access water that all neighbors have. The human rights defenders have the right to continue caring for our forests and water sources in the high lands of Las Granadillas.

17 PBI, Boletín nº 25, "Las áreas protegidas en Guatemala: la protección pública del territorio", Guatemala, marzo 2011, [http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/fileadmin/user\\_files/projects/guatemala/files/spanish/PBI\\_25\\_espanol.pdf](http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/guatemala/files/spanish/PBI_25_espanol.pdf)

18 PBI, Boletín nº 23, "Procesos legales contra actores protagonistas en la defensa y promoción de derechos humanos", enero de 2011, [http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/fileadmin/user\\_files/projects/guatemala/files/spanish/PBI\\_Boletin\\_Nr\\_23.pdf](http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/guatemala/files/spanish/PBI_Boletin_Nr_23.pdf)



### What is your take on the possible cases of criminalization in the region?

There are open legal processes against defenders from La Trementina. There are about 12 people criminalized with complaints against them for aggravated robbery, illegal detentions and threats. We are trying to get these cases dismissed. In addition, there have been complaints filed before the Human Rights Prosecutor against landowners and loggers for attacking, threatening and intimidating defenders. We see that the complaints we file do not progress while the cases against us do. This is a complicated situation because the conflict was never attend to, rather the will and interests of the landowners and loggers was imposed. The human rights defenders are scared to act or meet because they are singled out and are fearful they will end up in jail. This is how they have instilled fear in them and for this reason they are paralyzed. These attacks can come from landowners, neighbors or any other actor.

### What appeal would you ask of Guatemala and the international community?

To companies, learn to recognize and respect community rights – whether the rights of campesinos, indigenous peoples, women or children – the rights of these people are human rights. You need to learn to consult peoples before carrying out any form of extractive activity that could imply threats and risks to life.

To the State of Guatemala and the justice system, govern and hand down justice listening to communities. You have to stop giving privileges to the interests of transnational companies as they come to rape our country of its natural resources, minerals and water sources in the territories where we all live. That is where our life is – that is to say – the life of the communities is in the forests, water, and land because that is where we get our food that sustains us. For this reason the State of



Reverend José Pilar Álvarez talking with representatives of several communities about the defense of the Mountain, Guareruche, Chiquimula. Photo: PBI 2015.

Guatemala needs to prefer the economic and food base of the campesino and indigenous families. Mainly they need to place emphasis on ancestral and collective rights, the ancestral spirituality needs to reign over any other interest.

To the international community, monitor the companies from your countries with interests in Guatemala, respect human rights, and consult communities. You have to monitor the ac-

tions of these companies. If communities want a project, then it should become implemented. If a community wants that a project be terminated then it should be terminated. It is that easy. Meanwhile the Coordinator will continue to advocate for and support communities that are peacefully resisting because this is our mandate as churches, as organizations, and as communities. It is time that communities and neighbors exercise our right to defend our rights.

# Hydropower in Guatemala: questioning of and alternatives to large hydroelectric plants

*The World Commission on Dams proposes seven strategic priorities each supported by a set of policy principles, to develop water and energy resources: gaining public acceptance, comprehensive options assessment, addressing existing dams, sustaining rivers and livelihoods of local communities, recognising entitlements and sharing benefits, ensuring compliance, sharing rivers for peace, development and security.<sup>1</sup>*

Guatemala is a land of great biodiversity that possesses an enormous potential to generate energy. Water and the energy that it can generate are natural resources much sought after and open opportunities for lucrative businesses, both on the national and international level, making water a big interest for government in the country. Also in light of the impact of climate change and the dependence on fossil fuels as primary energy sources there is a possible alternative to produce and use “sustainable and renewable energy”<sup>2</sup>.

In the generation of renewable energy not everyone benefits. In Guatemala the high potential for hydropower is primarily located in watersheds in impoverished areas with a lack of public services and whose inhabitants are indigenous people who have been traditionally excluded and view these mega projects as a new form of subjugation<sup>3</sup>. All of this makes the situation very complicated, with the heart of the matter being the structural problems of the country<sup>4</sup>.

## The State's energy policy

Two fundamental aspects that have guided the State of Guatemala in their energy policy have been on one hand given the enormous potential for hydro power in the country, the

prioritization of the hydroelectric sector that in 2013 generated half of Guatemala's energy and on the other hand the liberalization processes that this sector has undergone since 1970. These processes have displaced the National Institute for Electrification (INDE) and the General Law on Electricity<sup>5</sup>, in the control of the chain of generation – distribution- commercialization-transportation of electricity, to transfer this responsibility to the market which imposes its rules and favors certain domestic and transnational private capital<sup>6</sup>.

In addition the Energy Policy 2013-2027, established by the Otto Pérez Molina administration<sup>7</sup>, aims to resolve the increase in demand for energy on behalf of industry and populations in the north, west and central parts of the country<sup>8</sup>, as well as for Mesoamerica. To do so the Plan for Indicative Expansion of the Generation System (PEG) 2014-2018 and the Plan for Expansion of the Transportation System (PET)<sup>9</sup> were created. The PET takes the idea, which existed since the 1960s, to interconnect the region known as the Franja Transversal del Norte, which stems from the Atlantic coast<sup>10</sup> to the Pacific coast. The maximum expression of these projects is called the hydraulic belt<sup>11</sup>.

- 1 World Commission On Dams, Dams And Development. A New Framework for Decision-Making, November 2000, [www.dams.org](http://www.dams.org)
- 2 Viaene, L., *La hidroeléctrica Xalalá en territorio maya q'eqchi' de Guatemala ¿Qué pasará con nuestra tierra y agua sagradas? Un análisis antropológico-jurídico de los derechos humanos amenazados*, 2015, Bélgica, p.14, [http://www.consultaprevia.org/files/biblioteca/fi\\_name\\_archivo.437.pdf](http://www.consultaprevia.org/files/biblioteca/fi_name_archivo.437.pdf)
- 3 Skarwan, D., *Las Hidroeléctricas deben contribuir para un desarrollo territorial sostenible. Una revisión de perspectivas, contradicciones y opciones urgentes para territorios rurales en Guatemala*, Revista Iberoamericana de Economía Ecológica, marzo de 2009, Guatemala.
- 4 Escalón, S., Plaza Pública, “Hidroeléctricas: ir al fondo de sus contradicciones”, junio 2012, <http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/hidroelectricas-ir-al-fondo-de-sus-contradicciones>
- 5 Gobierno de Guatemala, Ministerio de Energías y Minas (MEM), Política Energética 2013-2027. Energía para el desarrollo. Calidad, Cantidad, Competitividad, <http://www.mem.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/PE2013-2027.pdf>
- 6 Noriega, L., Brújula, “¿Por qué “no dejan trabajar” a las hidroeléctricas?”, septiembre 2014, <http://brujula.com.gt/por-que-no-dejan-trabajar-a-las-hidroelectricas/>
- 7 Gobierno de Guatemala, Ministerio de Energías y Minas (MEM), Op. Cit., p.8
- 8 El Observador, Nos 44-45, “Planes energéticos para el favorecimiento de las inversiones privadas y la competitividad capitalista”, abril-noviembre 2014, p. 4, <http://www.albedrio.org/html/otrosdocs/comunicados/EIObservadorNo44-45Planesenergeticos2014.pdf>
- 9 Viaene, L., Op. Cit.
- 10 El Observador, Op. Cit.
- 11 Escalón, S., Op. Cit.

## Past and present day marked by repression and conflict

The different notions of development, lack of prior, free and informed consultation with communities and the wound left by the violence perpetrated against people and communities during the armed internal conflict, are at the root of present day conflicts surrounding the installation of hydroelectric projects<sup>12</sup>.

The case of the Pueblo Viejo dam, better known as Chixoy, the largest in Guatemala, built between 1977 and 1983, constitutes one of the most brutal and traumatic experiences for the population in those ancestral lands<sup>13</sup>. In the neighboring community Río Negro, 444 of its 791 indigenous Achí inhabitants were massacred. About 3,500 people survived the massacre resettled to model villages<sup>14</sup>, where they were subject to threats, torture, forced labor and other human rights violations. After many years of fighting for justice by massacre survivors with the help of international pressure, the Guatemalan government passed Public Policy for Reparations for the Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam that will be implemented from 2015 to 2029, benefitting 33 indigenous communities<sup>15</sup>.

At the end of the armed conflict with the coming of the Peace Accords, the government of Guatemala ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 which binds governments to respect traditional values of indigenous peoples and tribes as well as consult them in all decisions that affect their social and economic development<sup>16</sup>, precisely to prevent conflicts and heinous acts like those that occurred with the Chixoy dam. None-the-less on many occasions these consultations do not take place or they have to be organized by the communities themselves, the results of the consultations are not binding before the Constitutional Court<sup>17</sup>. There are many communities and organizations that are reclaiming their right to prior, free, and informed consultation process in

face of the installation of hydroelectric projects. This is the case of the Campesino Central Coordinator New Day' Chortí (CCCND)<sup>18</sup> in Chiquimula, and Council of K'iche' Peoples (CPK) and the Council of Cunén Communities (CCC) in Quiché, all accompanied by PBI.

The violation of the right to a prior, free and informed consultation of communities as well as making decisions about their development generates mistrust. Land and water are not only goods necessary for subsistence, but are part of ancestral cosmology. In their spirituality all natural elements have a function and are indispensable for equilibrium in life<sup>19</sup>.

The construction of large hydroelectric projects have great impacts, not only on the environment but on the social life of communities as many activities that structure their societies are linked to water. These social impacts have been described by different actors, like in the case of Ecological Collective Madreselva, who states: "the dammed area that is flooded forces the native population to move; there is water loss for coastal populations, traditional uses for water (crop irrigation, fishing, human and animal consumption, recreation) disappear; the fisher people are left without a river and fish, and although the reservoir provides an alternative for fishing the species change.

A virtual robbery of the river happens"<sup>20</sup>. All of this greatly affects the life and identity of people and consequently their social fabric. Carlos Aragón, lawyer and member of CCCND, states, "in this context, there are two ways to understand the problem. Many people dominated by a capitalist lifestyle want electricity for their televisions and cellular phones. While people in communities value the access to energy but their priority is to guarantee that the lands they have historically lived on continue to belong to them"<sup>21</sup>.

12 Noriega, L., Op. Cit.

13 Johnston, B., *Chixoy dam legacies: The struggle to secure reparation and the right to remedy in Guatemala*, Water Alternatives, Vol.3 (2), 2010, p. 341-361.

14 According to the Commission for Historical Clarification's report, model villages were part of an army strategy during the armed conflict to exert control and dominate the populations displaced by violence. They were highly militarized resettlements according to the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) report, operating with "irregular detentions" and other human rights violations.

15 Viaene, L., Op.Cit.

16 OIT, "Guatemala ratifica un convenio por el que se garantizan los derechos de los indígenas", 13 de junio de 1996, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/media-centre/press-releases/WCMS\\_008418/lang-es/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/media-centre/press-releases/WCMS_008418/lang-es/index.htm)

17 Escalón, S., Op. Cit.

18 Burger, J., Feria-Tinta M., McGregor, C., Op. Cit.

19 Viaene, L., Op. Cit., pp.22.

20 Colectivo Ecologista Madre Selva, "Hidroeléctricas", [http://madreselva.org.gt/?page\\_id=129](http://madreselva.org.gt/?page_id=129)

21 Interview with Carlos Aragón, member of CCCND, 2015.



Mural announcing El Cajón - Caparja Hydroelectric megaproject on a Street in Jocotán, Chiquimula. Photo: PBI 2015

In regards to the environment, Madreselva points out that there are profound, multiple impacts: flora and fauna disappear, changes to native ecosystems in the river; stagnation and sedimentation of organic material (trees, animals and plants) that generate putrefaction, producing methane gas, one of the most active greenhouse gases; waters below the dam dry up, putting at risk all living things that inhabit the river and its banks<sup>22</sup>.

The social and environmental impacts are intimately related and both strongly affect communities and people that live in the areas where hydroelectric megaprojects are developed. In nearly 65% of the municipalities where in recent years hydroelectric construction licenses have been granted have registered situations of social conflict<sup>23</sup>. The companies' activities "have caused an unstable atmosphere of social conflict. This situation is recognized not only by the affected communities but also by the government, civil society and the companies themselves"<sup>24</sup>. Such projects implemented in indigenous territories are important points of tension in the country<sup>25</sup>.

### Community hydroelectric plants: a real alternative

The majority of the people and communities that resist large hydroelectric projects are not against the generation of energy or "development"<sup>26</sup>. Julio López Ventura, of the Campesino Unity Committee (CUC), states: "you have to think about what will be the yes of that no. As communities we must be more proactive and think of a model to use resources that would be acceptable to us"<sup>27</sup>. In this sense they are turning the argument around so that the hydroelectric projects focus on the demands of the communities where they install operations. As it is common practice in Guatemala that the communities affected by these projects do not even have access to electricity that they produce<sup>28</sup>. A bloody example of this is the Chixoy dam where the majority of the population of the villages near the dam do not yet have electricity<sup>29</sup>. Yet this is not the only case, "in Northern Quiché where two large hydroelectric plants (Palo Viejo and Hidro Xacbal) operate and three more are in the investigation stage, only 10 communities have access to electricity according to Segeplan (Presidential Secretariat on Programming and Planning)"<sup>30</sup>.

In light of experiences like the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant built by the Italian company ENEL (Ente Nazionale per l'Energia Elettrica) in the municipality of San Juan Cotzal, Quiché which has generated strong conflicts in communities<sup>31</sup>. There are different practices that constitute as a real alternative to large hydroelectric projects. Near Palo Viejo in the Zona Reina de Usphantán, Quiché where a Community of Population in Resistance (CPR) settled during the armed conflict, the CPR community have created a community hydroelectric plant. These communities made up of 440 families (approximately 2,725 people) with lots of experience in community service are currently organized as an association called Light of the Heroes and Martyrs of Resistance. This association is responsible for building and maintaining the community hydroelectric plant, the first of its kind to operate in the region. This project was born out of a participatory, community needs assessment which identified access to electricity as one of the basic neces-

23 Dirección de Incidencia Pública (DIP) de la Universidad Rafael Landívar, "Gestión e inclusión social en proyectos hidroeléctricos: cinco propuestas integrales", p. 8., [https://www.url.edu.gt/PortalURL/Archivos/208/Archivos/Gesti%C3%B3n\\_e\\_%20inclusi%C3%B3n\\_social\\_de\\_proyectos\\_hidroel%C3%A9ctricos\\_en\\_Guatemalaacompleto.pdf](https://www.url.edu.gt/PortalURL/Archivos/208/Archivos/Gesti%C3%B3n_e_%20inclusi%C3%B3n_social_de_proyectos_hidroel%C3%A9ctricos_en_Guatemalaacompleto.pdf)

24 Naciones Unidas, Informe del Relator Especial sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos y las libertades fundamentales de los indígenas, Sr. James Anaya, "Nota preliminar sobre la aplicación del principio de consulta con los pueblos indígenas en Guatemala y el caso de la mina Marlin", 2010 (A/HRC/15/37/Add.8), párrafo 5.

25 Consejo de Derechos Humanos, Informe Anual de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre las actividades de su oficina en Guatemala, Doc. ONU A/HRC/22/17/Add.1, 7 de enero de 2013, párr. 47 – 54.

26 Noriega, L., Op. Cit.

27 Escalón, S., Op. Cit.

28 Ibidem.

29 Colectivo Ecologista Madre Selva, OP. Cit.

30 Escalón, S., Op.Cit.

31 Ibid.

sities of communities<sup>32</sup>. This community hydroelectric plant differs from megaprojects that want to operate in the region as it directly benefits the local population using only small amounts of river water, without harming the river basin and respecting the mountain<sup>33</sup>. As representatives of the association explain the community-based initiative: “we built it and care for it – decisions are made during assemblies and the benefits are for the people who live in our community”. This is how it was from the beginning: the construction materials were carried by inhabitants with only the help of animals, covering an approximate distance of eight kilometers as there is no road access. This is how they transported the water pipes, cement, and turbine after locating the site on the Pajuil River and digging the ditch. The water holding tank, generation house, and the electricity distribution line were built. After a few years the project was put on hold. Then Madreselva helped us secure funding and advice on the canal, electric lines and connections in our homes<sup>34</sup>. Currently families pay Q20 a month for maintenance. The money covers the projects operational costs and allows for each family to have three lightbulbs in their homes<sup>35</sup>.

The community hydroelectric plant built by the Association Light of the Heroes and Martyrs of Resistance has served as inspiration to other neighboring communities. Such is the case of El Lirio Putul community also located in Uspantán who is generating their own electricity taking advantage of a small spring. Twenty-five Quetzals monthly per household are gathered for the service provided to cover the administration, operation and maintenance costs of the electric system by trained electricians from the community. The community’s Electricity Committee ensures that enough excess electricity is produced for the 300 homes and the functioning of welding equipment, bakery, and others that require 120 volts<sup>36</sup>.

Despite the hurdles they have encountered like not have financing from the government of Guatemala<sup>37</sup> and suffering from diverse risks and threats during project implementation<sup>38</sup>, they have managed to get ahead and the communities are proud of their achievements: “as Maya communities we have awakened saying that we can use our resources without harming them while safeguarding them”, comments Regina Valda Ramos López, member of the Association Light of the Heroes and Martyrs of Resistance<sup>39</sup>. Both community hydroelectric plants along with others like Chel, emerged as alternatives managed by communities in response to the megaproject Hidro Xacbal<sup>40</sup>. These are valuable examples that other types of development are possible – development that is respectful to the environment and communities. The communities and the local population define their own development in which their participation is essential.



Signs from march organized by several communities of Camotán and Jocotán in Camotán, Chiquimula. Photo: PBI 2015

32 Pérez R., La Hora, “Comunidades en el Quiché construyeron y gestionan su propia hidroeléctrica”, abril 2015, <http://lahora.gt/comunidades-en-quiche-construyeron-y-gestionan-su-propia-hidroelectrica/>  
 33 Chiquin, C., Prensa Comunitaria, “La luz de la resistencia”, marzo 2013 <https://comunitariapress.wordpress.com/2014/03/27/la-luz-de-la-resistencia/>  
 34 Pérez R., Op. Cit.  
 35 Chiquin, C., Op. Cit.  
 36 <http://www.elonce.com/secciones/internacionales/425390-guatemala-campesinos-generan-su-propia-energna-elnctrica.htm>  
 37 Ibid.  
 38 Pérez R., Op. Cit.  
 39 Ibid.  
 40 Comunicaciones aliadas, “Guatemala: ¿Son las micro hidroeléctricas la solución a los conflictos por energía?”, julio 2014, <http://www.comunicacionesaliadas.com/guatemala-son-las-micro-hidroelectricas-la-solucion-a-los-conflictos-por-energia/>

# Information about our work

The PBI Guatemala Project focuses its work in three areas that summarize the levels of structural violence as well as ongoing processes in defense of human rights. These areas are: the fight against impunity, access to land, and the negative effects of globalization on human rights.

## Current news in Guatemala

The constant analysis of current events is an essential tool in our work that allows us to adapt to changing circumstances and carry out our work in the most efficient manner possible. During this period two events have unleashed changes in the political and social reality of the country. These include: the results of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala's (CICIG) investigations in several corruption cases against high level officials from Otto Pérez Molina's administration and the electoral context and results.

The most visible result of CICIG's investigation was the apprehension of Vice President, Roxana Baldetti and subsequent resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina. Both of whom are accused of heading a corruption ring in customs, known as "La Línea." There were mass protests before the President's resignation and incarceration that demonstrated a new awakening in the population<sup>1</sup>.

In the electoral context, the first round of elections showed high levels of voter turnout, but did not leave a clear winner. In the second round of elections, marked by absenteeism, former comedian Jimmy Morales was elected president. Although there is no general consensus about the character of the new government, diverse sectors of civil society who defend and promote human rights, especially in regards to the situation of indigenous and campesino are concerned. This coupled with the paralyzation of emblematic legal cases and the growing criminalization of community leaders, generates uncertainty about the political and social path the country will take with the new government<sup>2</sup>.

## The fight against impunity

While accompanying the **Human Rights Law Firm** we observed Genocide Case hearings. On July 23, 2015 the case was

re-opened and a medical exam of José Efraín Ríos Montt was ordered to determine if his health allowed him to stand trial. On August 25 the court decided that even though he does not have full use of his mental faculties, Ríos Montt can be represented by his lawyers. The next trial is set for January 2016.

We continue to follow-up with the **National Coordinator of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA)** to improve their security situation and consequently reduce their requests for PBI presence. It was decided to transfer this accompaniment to follow-up stage. None the less, we remain in regular contact with members of the organization and maintain attentive if their security situation were to change. In November 2015, we observed the VII Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women of the Americas in Guatemala City which was organized by CONAVIGUA and other entities. The event lasted four days with the participation of approximately 300 women from different Latin American countries who presented their activities and interchanged experiences on topics related to life conditions of indigenous women, the defense of their economic, social, political and cultural rights.



Observing the VII Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women of the Americas in Guatemala City. Photo: PBI 2015

## Access to land

In our accompaniment to **Union of Campesino Organizations of Verapaz (UVOC)**, we have been very attentive to the Finca Primavera case which addresses the problems of mozo colonos. After several years of negotiations, an agree-

1 Prensa Comunitaria, "GUATEMALA #PARO NACIONAL: Crónica de tres días con un sólo grito: #Renuncia Ya!!!!", agosto de 2015, <https://comunitariapress.wordpress.com/2015/08/29/guatemala-paro-nacional-cronica-de-tres-dias-de-rabia-y-dignidad/>  
2 Figueroa Ibarra, C., Comunicarte, "De la mano dura al ciudadano puro", octubre de 2015, <http://noticiascomunicarte.blogspot.com/2015/10/de-la-mano-du-ara-al-ciudadano-puro.html>

ment was reached at the end of July granting land titles to 479 families of La Primavera community. We also accompanied UVOC during a national strike against corruption and for the celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day.

### The negative effects of globalization on human rights

**Campesino Central Coordinator New Day Ch'ortí (CCCND).** We have accompanied the organization in its work in supporting community processes to reclaim Maya Ch'ortí identity. We were present in celebrations recognizing several Ch'ortí communities including: Las Flores, Escobillar, Suchiquer, Matazanos, Guareruche and Pelillo Negro. In November we observed a panel discussion whose topic was the political participation of community women. During the national strike we observed a road block organized by CCCND on August 25 and 26 at the bridge at Jupilingo, Camotán.

**Peaceful Resistance of La Puya.** This half of the year we intensified our accompaniment to provide greater follow-up to the injunction issued on July 15 by the First Instance Civil Court, which orders the Municipal Council of San Pedro Ayampuc to suspend construction of the "El Tambor" Progreso VII Derivada mine until a court ruling is handed down, a consultation is conducted among neighbors, and an environmental impact study is conducted. On July 29th, we accompanied a verifying mission made up of representatives of La Puya and municipal delegates to verify the lack of observance of the injunction on behalf of the company. On August 3rd, we observed a protest at the mine entrance and in the early morning trucks filled with construction materials were escorted by anti-riot police (PNC). Several of the protesters denounced at the Human Rights Ombudsman's office (PDH) that they were threatened and held by the riot police. PBI published an Informational Sheet alerting the events<sup>3</sup>. On November 19 and December 3 we accompanied members of La Puya to a meeting with the PDH, Ministry of Energy and Mines, Ministry of Health, and the Ministry on Environment and Natural Resources (MARN) at the presidential house. The objective of these meetings was to transmit the importance of this case so that the government transfers the information to the new administration of Jimmy Morales.

**New accompaniment to Peaceful Resistance of La Laguna.** The same year in which the operations of the "El Tambor" mine were authorized, the Municipality of San Pedro Ayampuc also authorized a Colombian Company TRECSA (Transportadora de Energía Centroamericana S.A.) to install

an energy distribution plant that would provide energy to the mining company. The lack of consultation about the presence of this company, coupled with the resistance against the mine determined that on April 4 the community established a peaceful protest of resistance in the area. Their main request is that the construction guarantee and the operating licenses be canceled as they fear negative impacts, both to the environment and to the health of the population. The construction guarantee or endorsement was canceled in May 2015, however the company still has the licenses from MARM and MEM. After receiving the request for accompaniment and analyzing the case, we started accompanying this Resistance in November.

**Council of K'iche' Peoples (CPK).** After the elections and at the request of CPK, in November we decided to start accompanying them again now that the Council and its members are no longer linked to the political group their leader was a candidate for. On November 28 we observed and accompanied their assembly in Santa Cruz del Quiche.

### Follow-up visit to Petén

In the month of December we made a follow-up visit to the Petén department, making it our second trip in 2015. During the trip, we visited with different social actors, authorities and followed up on situations related to topics like: conflicts and infringement of rights in protected areas, militarization, women's rights, and impacts of megaprojects (tourism, hydroelectric, agrarian...), etc.

During our time in the region we noted in our talks with different actors a high level of uncertainty in regards to the new government that will take possession in 2016. We also observed that the situation of human rights defenders in the region continues to be complicated. The weak role of government institutions in the resolution of conflicts related to land access, paints a difficult situation for many communities. Such is the case of those who were evicted several years ago and continue to live in precarious situations without prospects of improvement. Other communities located in Sierra de Lacandon and Laguna del Tigre national parks live without access to public services and in constant uncertainty of future evictions.

During the trip we accompanied a march from San Benito to Flores to commemorate the Dos Erres massacre that took place in 1982. The march was organized by the communities of La Libertad, San Andrés and Las Cruces.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/field-projects/pbi-guatemala/latest-news/news/?no\\_cache=1&L=0&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=4727&cHash=10ea4311c050a76450df2576d7d46f43](http://www.pbi-guatemala.org/field-projects/pbi-guatemala/latest-news/news/?no_cache=1&L=0&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4727&cHash=10ea4311c050a76450df2576d7d46f43)



# PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT

**PBI** is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) which protects human rights and promotes non-violent transformation of conflicts. At the request of threatened social organizations, it provides international accompaniment and observation. The presence of international volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence. In this way, PBI creates space for local activists to work for social justice and human rights.

## 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.

## Mandate and Principles

Contribute to improve the human rights situation in Guatemala, and hereby strengthen the social and political processes that promote the enhancement of democracy and participation in the country and the region. Therefore **PBI** employs an international presence to create and maintain open political space for human rights defenders, lawyers, union members, campesino and indigenous organizations, and civil society groups that are suffering repression due to their work supporting human rights.

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

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### Team in Guatemala

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