

Knocking on environmental death's doors



Historically, the Guatemalan economy has been structured around an extraction-led growth model. The result has been the impoverishment of the rural population and the degradation of the environment. The sugar cane industry, for example, has deepened deforestation which has led to the displacement of entire communities whose rights have been simply brushed aside by businesses in pursuit of profit and a State too timid to regulate them. Successive governments have evaded their responsibility to create institutions that protect the environment and meet people's needs. Civil society organizations must demand a greater share in decision-making and must urge the Government to abandon this exploitative and destructive economic model in favour of sustainable development.

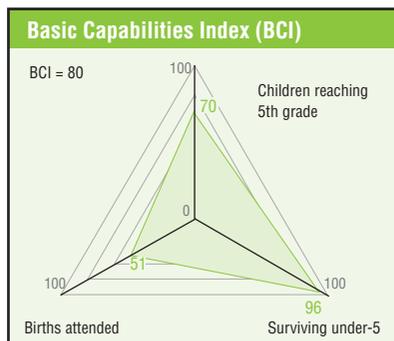
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Since the early 16th century, when it was conquered by Spain, Guatemala's economy has been based in agriculture and the intensive exploitation of the land by large estates through mono-cultivation for export and by small farms where peasants engage in subsistence and infra-subsistence production. In the last decade a new threat to the country's resources and biodiversity has emerged with the granting of licenses by the State to enterprises that prospect for minerals in most of the country. The exploitation of iron and gold deposits has spread chemicals such as cyanide, used in the gold industry, that cause irreparable damage to the country's water sources. These industries also consume large quantities of water, putting local communities' access to this resource in peril.

The power that these large enterprises have acquired stands in sharp contrast to shaky public institutions unable to control the industry's activities and promote an alternative model of sustainability. Present development models in Guatemala involve no long-term planning, have put the environment at risk and have plunged approximately half the country's population into poverty. In rural areas, 72% of the people live in poverty and 40%, in extreme poverty, while in indigenous communities 55% suffer extreme poverty.¹

The Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food, responsible for regulating and managing the environment, natural resources and agriculture, lack adequate financing and have little political weight in State decisions. In fact, the Government has almost no capacity to plan or control the agricultural or environmental sectors though these are the sectors on which Guatemala's economic, social and environmental sustainability largely depends. According to a Government report, Guatemala is "damaged socially and environmentally, and the main evidence of this is an increasingly serious breakdown of social

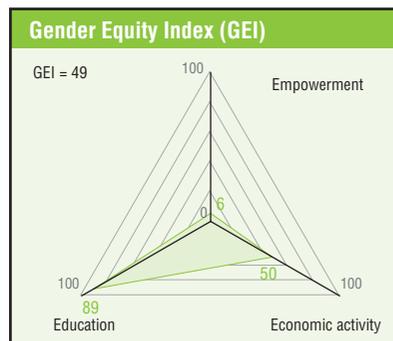


structures caused by the marginalization of large sectors of the population. This grim panorama makes the direct connection between the environment and poverty all too clear. The rural population is poorer now than in the past, when it had access to the fruits of nature."²

Unsustainability and the environment

The sugar cane industry, which devastates and flattens forests so the land can be planted with sugar cane, is just one example of how unsustainable the current model is. Based on the economic and political power of the big landowners, this industry has even managed to change the course of rivers so the water will be diverted to nourish their crops. The environmental result has been more frequent flooding in the winter and more droughts in the summer. Extensive sugar cane cultivation also causes higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions. "As part of the industrial process around 90-95% of the cane grown on more than 200,000 hectares is burned. Each hectare put to the torch releases 50 kilos of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which adds up to around 9,000 tonnes of this gas per year."³

Agriculture and the more recent extractive industries have exploited the forests without any serious effort at re-forestation, using the wood not only for construction but also as a fuel resource. As a result, the country's native forests have been all but annihilated. The deforestation rate is around 82,000 ha per year. If exploitation continues at this level, all



the country's native forests will have been wiped out by 2040.⁴

A very vulnerable land

The country is prone to earthquakes and violent storms owing to seismic activity along the Pacific Rim and its location on the Atlantic Ocean hurricane route. Moreover, a dry corridor runs across the central part of the country which is subject to drought and desertification. Climate change has intensified and worsened the effects of storms and drought.⁵

In 2010, Tropical Storm Agatha and the eruption of the Pacaya Volcano caused hundreds of deaths and approximately USD 950 million in material damage. Rural populations proved to be particularly vulnerable. The Government's lack of planning and long term vision and the unregulated exploitation of the environment creates a vicious circle in which each disaster leaves the country with serious problems which the next disaster only aggravates.

Sustainable development and rural development

The Guatemalan peasantry - often victims of government repression during the country's 36-year-long armed inner conflict and its aftermath - have more recently been negatively affected by structural adjustment measures and a newly implemented free trade regime.

On 30 April 2008 after a consultation process, the Alliance for Integrated Rural Development, made up of indigenous, peasant, environmentalist, trade

1 Plataforma Agraria, *Propuestas políticas*, (Guatemala: July 2008), <www.plataformaagraria.org/guatemala/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=55>.

2 Informe Ambiental Gobierno MARN.

3 Ibid.

4 G. Palma, A. Taracena, E. Baumaister, *Cambios en la tenencia de la tierra: tendencias históricas*, (Guatemala: UNDP, 2004).

5 Informe Ambiental Gobierno MARN, op cit.

union and research groups and other non governmental organizations (NGOs), signed an agreement with the Government on a framework for a national dialogue on holistic rural development and the resolution of the country's agricultural, labour and environmental conflicts. In November of that year, the participants - in collaboration with Government officials and even political advisers from the Office of the Presidency - submitted to the President himself proposals for a National Integrated Rural Development Law, designed to protect "the rural population living in poverty and extreme poverty, with priority to indigenous and peasant communities with insufficient or unproductive land or with no land; indigenous and peasant women; permanent and temporary paid workers, artisans, small rural producers; and micro and small rural entrepreneurs."⁶ Today, three years after it was drafted, the proposed law is still bogged down in the Congress, a telling example of the lack of political will to pursue real solutions to the problems of agriculture and the use of natural resources in the country.

Meanwhile local people continue to resist mega-projects that move into an area, but these are largely ignored by enterprises and the State both. In frustration, entire populations leave what are often ancestral lands and wander in search of some other way of staying alive. For example, in April 2011 some 800 families living on land claimed by a sugar mill enterprise were forcibly evicted by enforcers hired by the putative proprietors and helped by public security forces. The peasant leader, Antonio Beb Ac, was killed, and men, women and children were driven off their land and their crops burned with total impunity

Mining and resistance

The development model which the Government and the World Bank are promoting in Guatemala does not respond to the needs of the local population. Investment in the country is geared exclusively to consolidating that model although it is exploitative, oppressive, discriminatory, unsustainable and promotes inequality.

The World Bank regarded a credit that its International Finance Corporation (IFC) granted to the Canadian enterprise Glamis Gold Corporation as a contribution to Guatemala's "national development," despite the fact that it went to finance the opening of the Marlin gold mine in the department of San Marcos, a project that affects the municipalities of San Miguel Ixtahuacán and Sipacapa. Neither the IFC nor the Government analysed the possibility of using the profits from this venture to set up a sustainable cultural and environmental development plan for the region. Nor did they weigh the social, environmental and economic costs and benefits of the project to determine to what extent and in what time frame the mine should be worked.

6 CNOC, CNP-T, CNAIC, CONGCOOP/IDEAR, *Comunicado de Prensa: El Gobierno debe cumplir sus compromisos en relación a la Política y la Ley de Desarrollo Rural Integral*, (Guatemala: February 2009).

INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

For the Mayan population, non-violent opposition to development projects that affect them and their lands is a matter of principle. According to Leonor Hurtado, an activist in the National Resistance Front against Mining in Guatemala, "This is directly connected to freedom and dignity. This kind of resistance, whereby indigenous people defend themselves against aggression in a peaceful and active way, fosters unity in the community as they band together in pursuit of a common goal and stimulates them to organize and mobilize in ways that are based on their own values and their own cultural identity."⁷

In an interview with Hurtado, the "Principales" (indigenous leaders) explained in San Juan Sacatepéquez that the peaceful resistance means "respect for Mother Earth and faith that her strength will tell us what to do". We can never meet a threat with weapons because weapons mean the end, they lead to killing, they turn a person into the weakest and most despicable thing there is. Indigenous people come from nature and we resist silently, without showing anger, and we know that we have dignity and we are in the right. These values have enabled us to survive and resist for centuries, and they also give us the ability and the knowledge to defend ourselves and make a contribution."

A Principal from Sipacapa also told her that "gold is like the mountain's weapon, it supports it, it gives it form, it gives the mountain its energy and its balance so there can be life. If you take away the gold you destroy the mountain, and even if afterwards you put the earth back it will not be the same."

A geologist told Hurtado that the indigenous leader at Sipacapa "is absolutely right ... The gold is part of the structure of the mountain and this structure is essential if there is to be life.

7 Hurtado, Leonor, *Explotación minera: Una herida en la tierra y en la sociedad*, Revista Pueblos, (Madrid: junio de 2006).

A community movement against this mining venture has accused the Government of imposing the project as if it had been fully authorized while in fact there was no consultation whatsoever with the population, which is a prior step laid down in international law. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, a State is required to "...consult the interested peoples through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever legislative or administrative measures that may affect them directly are being considered."⁷

Though the Government ratified the Convention, it lacks mechanisms to implement it. The mining law is also at odds with the country's Municipal Code and the Law of Urban and Rural Development Councils.

Looking to the Future

To reverse the ongoing pollution of the environment and the erosion of the population's quality of life, the Government must adopt a sustainable development model as soon as possible. It is urgent and imperative to impose a system that safeguards the use of and democratic access to the land in a healthy co-existence with nature.

The country must preserve the great wealth of biodiversity which it currently enjoys. It needs land recuperation plans that protect and sustain natural and food-producing areas. It must bring society as a whole, and especially impacted local populations, into a broad and active national planning process. Local communities should be making the key decisions about how the

natural environment in their areas should be changed and what means should be employed to do so. Decisions of this importance should be based on the values, world vision and development aspirations of the local populations. National development plans should be built around the country's ecosystems and the interests of the people who live in them.

Sustainability must be based on a rural development model that is geared to the land itself and to the equitable distribution of its wealth. Current development models are always based on private enterprises pillaging the land. If rural development is to succeed, it has to be rooted in small-scale, peasant family agriculture. Only this way can peasant families get access to credits, technical assistance, education, technology and necessary infrastructure. Agro-ecological research programmes that seek ways to reduce to an absolute minimum the use of chemical products that damage the soil must be established and supported. Steps must be taken to safeguard ecosystems. The community and the State must seriously pursue the use and protection of native seeds, particularly of grain.

People's participation must extend to the field of sustainable development. Special attention must be paid to the re-settlement of populations that have been uprooted by the armed conflict. Criteria to govern production and the sustainable development of resources, the selection of suitable land, the recuperation of polluted land, and the management of water, infrastructure and sewage will have to be defined. An agreement on the identity and rights of indigenous peoples will also strengthen environmental protection, the rational use of natural resources, the use of science and technology to preserve the environment and the sustainable administration of natural resources. ■

7 ILO, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169, (1989) <www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>.