



Land, Territory and Human Rights Violations in Guatemala

A Webinar Report





In 2018, Global Witness found that Guatemala had experienced the highest increase in the number of murders of land and environmental defenders of any country in the world. Last year alone, the president of the village chapter of the Comité de Desarrollo Campesino (CODECA), a national organization of social movements led by indigenous people who work for the recognition of land rights, was murdered, as well as four of his colleagues. Many of these murders occurred in the municipality of Izabal. Izabal is home to mining operations, oil palm plantations and decades of community displacement of Maya Q'eqchi'.

Once again, according to Global Witness, Guatemala is now among the most dangerous countries in the world for land and environment activists. According to the UK-based group, the country experienced a five-fold increase in the number of murders of land defenders between 2017 and last year, with 16 deaths, which made it one of the bloodiest countries per capita.

The murders are only the tip of the iceberg, in terms of abuses faced by people who defend their territory and their environment. There are a variety of situations at play, including multiple threats, physical and verbal attacks, imprisonment and criminalization. “The backbone of the policy of repression against human rights defenders focuses on two significant types of aggression: criminalization, which kills civilian life; and physical elimination. In both cases, the central objective is to silence the voices of rights defenders.”

Therefore, the main purpose of this webinar was to gather a variety of perspectives, so that webinar panelists could be provided with a central focus on the way forward in terms of action / calls to the action for organizations, governments and others.

Moderator:

Gina Alvarado, Landesa (provides an introduction to the violence being faced by rights defenders in the Americas and the Caribbean)

Presenters:

Gina Alvarado, Landesa (introducción sobre la violencia en las Américas y el Caribe)

Leiria Vay, Comité de Desarrollo Campesino, CODECA (panelist)

Cristina Ardón, Comité Campesino del Altiplano, CCDA (panelist)

Omar Jeronimo, Nuevo Dia (panelist)

Recording of the webinar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rPsabj_dwA



Key Takeaways

- Violence in Guatemala has its origins in the invasion, colonization and the imposition of labor for slavery, as well as the civil war, which lasted more than 36 years.
- The main actors in this violence are companies, the media and the state, among others. The victims are the communities resisting the dispossession and those whom are defending their lands and territories. Finally, the leaders/defenders in the communities and organizations are victims, as well as indigenous women.
- Collective attacks include threats to communities or peoples. In most of these cases, the army represses the communities. Individual or personal attacks on leaders and defenders include defamation, stigmatization, among others.

Webinar Summary

1) WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE VIOLENCE WHICH WE ARE DISCUSSING?

- Violence in Guatemala has been historical for the Guatemalan population, especially indigenous and peasant women. We have lived through different forms of dispossession, invasion, colonization, imposition of labor for slavery, as well as the civil war which lasted more than 36 years. In addition, violence and repression in Guatemala has its origin and responds to protect the economic interests of large capitalists or transnational corporations in the country.
- We continue to face a model of “development” imposed by the capitalist system that is based on the accumulation of wealth through labor exploitation. This is also based on the displacement of land and territory that violates the right to food and therefore violates human rights in general.

2) WHO ARE THE MAIN ACTORS OF THIS VIOLENCE? WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS AND WHY?

- The current government and weak institutions are the first actors to consider when speaking about this violence. Others include justice operators whom are linked to the country’s oligarchy, as well as drug traffickers. They use the armed forces, the army and the police, the public ministry and the judicial body in their favor.
- The main actors and perpetrators of violence are companies, the three powers of the state (executive, legislative and judicial); the state institutions of the justice system, the media, churches, municipal governments, the police and the army. The victims are the communities who are resisting the dispossession and defending their lands and territories. The leaders and defenders in the communities, as well as indigenous women, are the biggest victims.

3) WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF VIOLENCE BEING USED AND WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCE IN TACTICS USED BY SEX, AGE AND ETHNICITY?

- Violence and repression against communities and land rights defenders occur in a variety of different ways. Collective attacks include threats to communities or

towns, such as theft of rivers, aerial spraying, dispossession of ancestral lands, road closures or repression and defamation.

- Individual or personal attacks on leaders and defenders also include defamation, stigmatization, beatings, threats, kidnappings, criminal proceedings against defenders, arbitrary imprisonment and murder, etc.

4) WHAT ARE THE ORGANIZATIONS ON THIS PANEL DOING ABOUT SAID VIOLENCE ?

- In the case of the CCDA, resistance happens through the training processes, meetings to strengthen community networks for direct support to affected communities, to carry out political actions to fight claims that make visible the problem, through press conferences and communiqués.
- In the case of CODECA, different strategies have been implemented. CODECA has assumed the task of communicating the struggles on the ground in order to make reality visible, and to denounce injustices. CODECA also believes that the Government of Guatemala must respond to the interests of the people and not to the economic power sectors of the country, to enforce laws and the justice system. The Government must guarantee rights for the people.
- In the case of Nuevo Día, strategies to protect rights have become collective. In the absence of State guarantees, it is the communities that present themselves as defenders of collective human rights based on non-violent practices, as opposed to leaders, Nuevo Día has made multiple attempts to guarantee protection policies for these defenders and to initiate dialogue. We have constitutional resolutions in favor of us defenders, but these are violated by government institutions. This is done in the interest and favor of companies, and to our detriment. We seek to remind the international community that human rights are universal and that we, as collective humanity, have the obligation to demand and fight that these rights are promoted for all.

Notable Quotes from the Panelists



“VIOLENCE AND REPRESSION ARE INTENDED TO CURB THE RESISTANCE AND STRUGGLES OF PEOPLE TO DEFEND MOTHER EARTH, TERRITORIES AND NATURAL ASSETS.”
- LEIRIA VAY, COMITÉ DE DESARROLLO CAMPESINO, (CODECA)



“THE LIVING CONDITIONS WILL CHANGE IF GOVERNMENTS ENSURE THAT PEASANTS ARE CONSIDERED WHEN IT COMES TO RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT. WE CAN LIVE A DIGNIFIED LIFE WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUAL CONDITIONS, WITHOUT RACISM AND WITHOUT EXCLUSION.”
- CRISTINA ARDÓN, COMITÉ CAMPESINO DEL ALTIPLANO, (CCDA)



“WE WISH TO REMIND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE UNIVERSAL. IF THEY ARE VIOLATED IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD, WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION AS HUMANITY TO TO DEMAND AND FIGHT BECAUSE THEY SHOULD BE PROMOTED FOR AND RESPECTED BY EVERYONE.”
- OMAR JERONIMO, NUEVO DIA



“LATIN AMERICA STILL DEPENDS HEAVILY ON LAND, IN THE SENSE THAT ITS ECONOMIES ARE SUSTAINED BY EXTRACTIVE AND AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES. LAND IS A KEY PLAYER IN MANY OF LATIN AMERICA’S ECONOMIES, ESPECIALLY IN CENTRAL AMERICA. UNFORTUNATELY, IN MANY OF THESE COUNTRIES INSTITUTIONS AND LAWS THAT RECOGNIZE PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR ALL, DO NOT EXIST.”
- GINA ALVARADO, LANDESA



LAND PORTAL FOUNDATION

Bakboord 35, 3823 TB Amersfoort, the Netherlands
www.landportal.org | hello@landportal.org