Linking national and international campaigns helps reverting land grab

In March 2011, 769 families from fourteen Q'eqchi communities were evicted from the Polochic Valley, Guatemala, to allow further expansion of sugar cane plantations. Through its international CRECE (“Grow”) campaign, Oxfam supported the national organization Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC, Peasant Unity Committee) in its advocacy effort to revert the land grab. A global campaign gathered 107,000 signatures from 55 countries to support the cause. In October 2013, the President of Guatemala publicly handed back 140 land titles in the valley and promised to resolve the situation of the remaining families in the course of 2014.
GOOD PRACTICES
Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC’s Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners’ experience in promoting people-centred land governance, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members.

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This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

- **Commitment 5** Secure territorial rights for Indigenous Peoples
- **Commitment 8** Ensure transparency and accountability
- **Commitment 9** Prevent and remedy land grabbing

Case description

Background issues

Guatemala is characterized by a high degree of land concentration, a large indigenous population and strong exclusion levels. The Gini coefficient for Guatemala, an indicator that measures the inequality in accessing land, is one of the highest in the world. The country was not able to perform, as most of its neighbours, an effective agrarian reform, nor did it establish other agrarian or fiscal policies that could have resulted in more egalitarian access to land (Mauro and Merlet 2003).

Guatemala has been recently re-discovered internationally as a suitable area for the production of biofuels, both ethanol (sugar cane) and biodiesel (oil palm). This has given rise to a wave of land dispossession, targeting indigenous and peasant territories. According to Oxfam, the area planted with sugar cane in Guatemala increased from 3.4% of the total agricultural area in 1980 to 14% in 2008.

The Polochic Valley, in the north west of the country, is one of the areas targeted for increased sugar cane cultivation. The region covers the municipalities of Tamahú, La Tinta, Tucurú Panzós, Senahú (Alta Verapaz Department) and El Estor (Izabal Department). Its geography includes a valley of fertile lands irrigated by the Polochic River, which flows into the Izabal Lake, the largest in Guatemala. Almost 90% of the total population of some 300,000 inhabitants are indigenous Maya-Q’eqchi. According to the Guatemala Human Development Report (UNDP 2010), the five municipalities of Alta Verapaz in the Polochic Valley recorded the lowest rates of development nationally and chronic malnutrition in the communities of the region is very high: between 65% to 85% of children under five.
In 2005, the Widmann family moved their sugar cane refinery from the south coast to the Polochic Valley, renaming it Chawil Utz’aj (‘Good Cane’ in the local Q’eqchi language). By 2008, Chawil Utz’aj had planted 5000 hectares of sugar cane. However, by 2010 the company was struggling to repay a loan and the mill’s land was put up for public auction. Farming families who had to leave the valley a few years earlier decided to return in late 2010 to occupy the land for food production. However, in March 2011 private security units forcibly evicted 769 Q’eqchi families in fourteen communities of the Polochic Valley, in order to make way for more sugar plantations. During the eviction, the families’ crops were destroyed and they were forced to live in dire poverty.

The Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) has been an anchor organization for the March of Indigenous Peoples, Peasants, and Grassroots Communities (March 2012), which first called attention to the Polochic Valley evictions. Founded in 1978, the CUC is dedicated to defending rights to land, water and food sovereignty and represents over 200 rural communities. Land conflicts in this region of Guatemala have been extremely violent: also in 1978, on May 29, soldiers opened fire on a group of Q’eqchi Mayan peasants who had come to request the government’s help in settling a land dispute. Over 34 men, women, and children were murdered (IWGIA 1978).

Launched in June 2011, GROW is Oxfam’s campaign to build a better food system that sustainably feeds a growing population and empowers poor people to earn a living, feed their families, and thrive. With supporters in more than 50 countries, the GROW campaign exposes the governments whose failed policies are propping up an unsustainable food system and the powerful companies who benefit from it and lobby hard to maintain it.

Solution

The Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) joined forces with Oxfam-Guatemala and Oxfam Intermón Spain to give the Polochic case global resonance, by connecting the local cause with a global campaign. The campaign teams in both countries saw that carrying out a bi-national public operation on Polochic was a win-win situation: the campaign in Guatemala needed to gain strength nationally and internationally to demand that the President of Guatemala fulfil his commitment to the evicted families and the campaign in Spain needed to raise awareness among the Spanish public on the importance of stopping land grabbing.

Activities

In 2011, the Guatemala team coordinated - together with Oxfam in Spain - a first international campaign tour of local representatives in different cities to develop a lobby and media agenda in Spain. A second tour in June 2012 aimed at raising awareness on the Guatemalan government’s lack of response to the land grabbing claims. At the end of this tour, Oxfam in Guatemala, Oxfam Intermón in Spain and the CUC jointly agreed that they had a common interest in developing a bi-national public campaign.

A phase of dialogue, negotiation and common construction between the CUC, Oxfam and a broader group of alliances, including La Vía Campesina and ILC on a regional level, began with mutual familiarization, formulating agreements and promoting discussions to decide on the best ways to proceed. Oxfam already had experience in waging
campaigns in Guatemala and had developed specific expertise in the country in the previous four years.

Between February and April 2013, Oxfam focused on raising attention through continuous media presence and executed “indirect” pressure on the Guatemalan government, through the generation of a risk to its image. The public campaign began to take place mainly in Guatemala, and the support of the international public was provided ad-hoc and based on the campaign’s needs.

At least seven different national and international forums were organized to present the case, create national and international pressure, and add institutional and public support. Some opportunities were particularly significant, such as having the Office of the Special Rapporteur of the OAS to issue a ruling on the case and the case presented before the UN’s Committee on Food Security.

Support was also gathered through the collection of signatures internationally, with the support of public figures like Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemalan indigenous leader and Nobel Prize laureate. International backing was successfully obtained from thousands of people worldwide, sensitized through social networks, media and other communication tools. A public petition supported by over 107,000 signatures from 55 countries called on President Molina to deliver on his promise to give back the disputed lands to the communities. As the campaign progressed, other Oxfam offices added their efforts to increase the pressure and collect more signatures within the GROW campaign framework.

The public campaign strategy was based on online tools that managed to internationalize the case immediately, reaching diverse audiences and ensuring a broad public coverage. Using online platforms like Avaaz or Change increased exponentially the awareness and support for the campaign.

After the official delivery of the signatures, which marked the reopening of the dialogue between the government and the communities, the public campaign was put on hold, as it entered a phase of political advocacy at the national level. The momentum was maintained - although manners were moderate - until four days before land begun to be delivered in October 2013.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

In the opinion of the CUC, the Polochic case had an echo that generated conditions to develop a more progressive political agenda in Guatemala. The issue has become a topic for debate and the public has become aware of it nationally and internationally. This success demonstrates the importance of strong local partnerships in global advocacy work.
Changes

Baseline

Between the 15th and the 19th of March 2011, the government of Guatemala violently evicted 769 families from fourteen Q’eqchi communities in order to make way for sugar plantations. The eviction process was carried out by hundreds of policemen and private security personnel in the Municipality of Panzós, in the Polochic Valley. Among the displaced communities there were Paraná, Tres Estrellas, Tinaja, Recuerdo, Miralvalle, Inup Agua Caliente, San Pablo Pamoxán, Santa Rosita, Quinich, Río Frío, Rodeo, 8 de Agosto, La Ceiba, Bella Flor, Sauce Sur y San Miguelito. Only 27% of the affected families had farmland, mostly rented and with an average area of 0.5 hectares. These conditions allowed them to produce only between 8 and 15 quintals of corn have per year. This was well below the minimum required for an average family, set by FAO at 32 quintals. As a result, less than half of the families were able to consume three meals a day (IXIM, CUC y FGT 2013).

Achievements

In October 2013, the first 140 families out of 769 got land titles from the President of Guatemala, who committed publicly to resolving the land issues of the remaining families in the course of 2014.

The public campaign has achieved a real change in the balance of power between the communities and the farmer organisations, on one hand, and the Guatemalan government and the Ingenio Chabil Utzaj company, on the other hand.

In terms of scalability and impact, the resolution of this case made a great contribution to the country’s debate on agricultural policies. The CUC - as a historic rural movement - contributed with its legitimacy of over 40 years of experience in land disputes. Oxfam - as an international organisation - provided its multidisciplinary technical capacities and its vast international networks and connections.

Evidence

On the 10th of June 2016, a framework agreement was signed through which the State of Guatemala pledged to comply with the precautionary measures issued by the IACHR (MC-121-11) in July 2011, in favour of fourteen Maya Q’eqchi communities in the Polochic Valley http://copredeh.gob.gt/firma-acuerdo-dar-cumplimiento-medida-cautelar-dictada-la-cidh/

On the 19th of September 2016, a total of 108 families Polochic Valley were temporarily relocated by the Government of Guatemala in response to precautionary measures issued by the IACHR. According to an agreement signed by the Guatemalan government, the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj and local residents, the temporary relocation of the families took place in the Mercedes and Sauce Sur farms - Guatemalan News Agency http://copredeh.gob.gt/gobierno-guatemala-reubica-108-familias-del-polochic/
Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

Before launching the campaign, the leading team must assess whether there is a legitimate political-legal framework to support the claim. For the Polochic case, the Government of Guatemala had publicly pledged to resolve the problem and there was a favourable ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

International pressure was useful to make the government uncomfortable and bring about movement for a swift resolution of the problem. In spite of its direct tone, the campaign was always respectful and did not stir up excessive resistance or aversion within the government. The pressure was never lowered, although the tones that were used were moderate.

The international campaign should always have the political backing of the local families and communities that are demanding a change. They are the “real actors” of transformation and also the public face of the campaign in many important moments.

It is key to define a campaign team composed of experienced personnel, social organizations accompanying the case and representatives of the affected communities. The campaign team is responsible for designing the strategy, building consensus and assuming the leadership in the implementation phase.

Lessons for policy makers

The Polochic case illustrates the negative consequences of dysfunctional agrarian policies, which empower and protect large single crop landowners while displacing small farmers who contribute the most to food security.

The campaign succeeded in generating a basic consensus and results-oriented strategies with government entities such as Fontierra, which allowed local actors to obtain information, develop its capacities and open new possibilities for negotiation.

Challenges

As the campaign team worked with historical and structural topics that ran up against very deeply-held views among social movements, the State and non-governmental organisations, there are cultural and contextual factors that have to be understood and taken into account.

One of the implied challenges of this model of campaigning is the generation of networks of social movements around the world. It is key that a campaign’s strategy aims at strengthening this connection with international citizenship, raising awareness on the reality of the affected people and the structural causes behind it.
Follow-up
The fight is not over, as 629 families are still waiting for justice. Through different lobby and communications actions at the national, regional and global levels, Oxfam and its allies will keep on pressuring the government to fulfil its commitment to a complete resettlement of all evicted families, ensuring dignified transfer, food assistance, housing, productive projects, education and health services.

Supporting material

References and further reading
GROW: Oxfam's website campaign to build a better food system.
http://www.oxfam.org/en/campaigns/grow


http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/legacy/legacypdf/kpguatemala03.pdf?q=pdf/kpguatemala03.pdf


OACDH (2013). Los desalojos en el Valle del Polochic. Una mirada a la problemática agraria y a la defensa de los derechos humanos de las comunidades q’eqchi’s. Geneva: Oficina del Alto Comisionado para los Derechos Humanos de Naciones Unidas


Peasant Unity Committee Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/Comit%C3%A9-de-Unidad-Campesina-CUC-410347102371559/
Photos, videos
IDEAR-Congcoop and Caracol Producciones (2012). Evictions in the Polochic Valley (English subtitles) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUfbH0kSV0s


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