

International Land Coalition / Trócaire Case Study: The Global Call to Action on Indigenous and community Land Rights

“We live right next to the plantation and the guards are always passing the house. They shout at us, they scare the children, they insult me and threaten that they will shoot me. The children don’t want to go to school any more. They threw tear gas at us once when I was pregnant.”

These are the words of Cecilia who, along with hundreds of other families was forcefully evicted from land in Bajo Aguan Honduras. Across the border in the Polochic Valley Guatemala, 769 Maya-Q’eqchi families have also been forcefully evicted. Their land has been grabbed to make way for the expansion of industrial scale sugar cane and African palm plantations for the production of food products, cosmetics and biofuels.

In both cases women in these communities face multiple forms of discrimination – for their social class, ethnicity, gender and rural identity. The experiences of these landless women have been documented in [a study called ‘Economies of Dispossession: Women from Honduras and Guatemala in the Global Scramble for Land’ by Trócaire.](#)

Trócaire is a participant in the Global Call to Action on Indigenous and community Land Rights and has been working with the families of these communities for a number of years providing humanitarian support, legal aid, sustainable livelihoods through its local partners, as well as monitoring of the human rights situation. Trócaire has also carried out international advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about the impact of agri-business, particularly the biofuels market, on the communities of the Aguan and the Polochic Valley.

The cases of the Aguan and the Polochic Valley are part of a historical continuum where the process of land accumulation by dispossession has led to repeated violent evictions of indigenous people and campesinos. In the past this violence was exercised as a strategy for the colonisation and domination of indigenous communities, later it was a tactic employed by the counter-insurgent army. In the contemporary context, land grabbing has become a hallmark of the expansion of African palm and sugar cane plantations in Guatemala and Honduras.

Polochic Valley

“During the evictions they burned everything, we were left with nothing. We had to find land to rent. Now we are renting land at 300 quetzales (approximately US\$40) a month and we don’t know what is going to happen in the future.” Testimony from Polochic Eviction

In 2011, 769 Maya-Q'eqchi families, who were in the process of demanding legal rights to the land they were occupying, were forcefully evicted from 14 communities across the Polochic Valley, in order to consolidate land for the production of sugar cane in the Chabil Utzaj plantation. They lost their lands, their homes, their animals and their belongings. Some of the Q'eqchi women who live in Polochic are survivors of massacres that occurred during the internal armed conflict in Guatemala 1960-1996. In the years since the evictions just over 200 families have received alternative lands. 500 or so more families are still waiting for the allocation of new land. In the meantime their living conditions, health and wellbeing are ever more precarious.

Bajo Aguan

The women try not to walk alone so that they are not attacked by the guards and we can't leave our houses after 5pm, it is not safe... When there are guards around we can't walk alone or else they will take us into the palm plantations.” (Angela, Bajo Aguan)

The Permanent Observatory for Human Rights of the Aguan has documented the murders of 129 people between 2008 and 2013. The conflict dates back to 1992-1994 when hundreds of campesino families were coerced into selling their cooperatively-owned palm plantations to private landowners, principally Miguel Facuseé of the Dinant Corporation, now the largest landowner in the Aguán. The cooperatives have repeatedly contested the legality of the sales and the current land titles. They have suffered multiple human rights abuses at the hands of state and private security forces including arbitrary detention, forced disappearances and assassinations.

The Trocaire study found that the Q'eqchi women of Polochic and the campesino women of Aguan have been exposed to forms of physical, sexual and structural violence including sexual harassment and sexual violence, the destruction of their homes and belongings, lack of sufficient food for them or their children, lack of access to clean water, education and health care, the lack of alternative land or employment opportunities, and the daily discrimination they face for daring to defend their human rights.

However the report highlights that these women are not simply victims. They play a crucial role in the community resistance to the land grabbing. They have formed women's councils, they participate in marches, blockades and land occupations, they have been on the front lines when facing security forces and participated in negotiations with the state or the companies involved. They have become more conscious of their rights as women and have even begun to demand that their rights to own land is recognised by their husbands, the community and the government.

The women have been accused of being 'bad' wives or mothers for 'abandoning' family duties because of their participation in the community struggle. The media, the state and security forces also stigmatise and criminalise them, accusing them of infidelity or prostitution - a common strategy used to delegitimise the community struggle. They have faced threats, intimidations, sexual and physical violence, defamations, arrest warrants, imprisonment and assassination. Despite these challenges, for many campesino and indigenous women in Guatemala and Honduras, the defence of their territories is a question of life and death. They are defending their way of life, their culture, their ancestral connection to the land, their sustenance and their livelihoods.

[Read full study 'Economies of Dispossession: Women from Honduras and Guatemala in the Global Scramble for Land' \(available in English and Spanish\)](#)