Case Study
The Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Protection: MOPAWI, Honduras
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Overview

Organization
MOPAWI, Honduras

Project Description
A campaign to prevent the construction of a dam that threatened environmental destruction and the land rights of indigenous people.

Issues
Advocacy, lobbying, multinational corporations, indigenous peoples, land rights, the environment

Context
The Mosquitia is a vast region making up a quarter of the area of Honduras with various natural ecosystems. It is inhabited by five ethnic peoples: Miskitos, Tawahka, Pech, Garifuna and Mestizo, better known locally as Ladino. The population of 110,000 (less than 2 percent of the national population) finds itself confronted with the process of transition from a subsistence economy to a market economy. The population of the Mosquitia is officially recognized as one of the poorest of the country, in spite of inhabiting a region with rich natural resources. Its poverty is linked to the high level of illiteracy (over 50 percent) and poor educational services. While most of the indigenous peoples of Honduras have lost their language, the geographical isolation of La Mosquitia has preserved much of their culture and language.

Recent moves to a market economy are threatening the natural resources of the region. Foreign capital, for example, is hiring local people to fish local species of lobster (Panulirus argus) and snail (Strombus gigas), potentially driving these species to extinction. Local people believe their poverty is due to the lack of employment, making them vulnerable to any offer of jobs. They will accept exploitation of their natural resources if this brings in some income. This will continue until their land rights are recognized and a political and legal system set up to respect this property.

MOPAWI was established on Christian principles in 1985 to reduce poverty in the Mosquitia area through sustainable agriculture, preventive community healthcare and micro-enterprise. MOPAWI soon discovered that the destruction of the regions natural resources posed a greater threat to its population. MOPAWI realized that the social structure was poorly organized

1 This paper also appears in Justice, Mercy and Humility, ed. Tim Chester, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003)
or non-existent. It therefore started a programme to foster and create community organizations. Working with MOPAWI, the five ethnic groups of the region have in recent years introduced bilingual primary education, formed indigenous political organizations, lobbied to reduce deforestation and are in the process of achieving some important successes on land right claims. Fifteen years ago integral mission could not have been imagined. But the process of claiming land rights has developed local skills, community participation and the capacity of the community to respond to outside threats as the case of the Patuca II Dam demonstrates.

**Description**

In the 1970s Honduras built its largest ever hydro-electrical project, *El Cajón*. The dam not only supplied sufficient energy for national needs, it produced a surplus for other countries in the region. But in 1994 the longest ever dry season, the result of forest degradation meant it could no longer meet demand and electricity was rationed. Meanwhile neighbouring countries put pressure on the Honduran Government to present schemes for the regional interconnection.

The Government had regarded river Patuca and Rio Sico in the Mosquitia as possible hydro-electric resources since the 1960s. In 1995 they contracted two American companies to build the Patuca II Dam with a 40 year concession to sell electricity to the state electricity company. The proposed site for construction was Patuca Medio. It lay between two areas which for seven years we had been waiting to be declared protected areas. The process had remained entangled in bureaucratic paperwork. Construction companies were hired without any reliable study of the environmental impact. Down river 10,000 indigenous Miskitos and Tawahka would be affected. A 60 kilometre road was to be built with a camp site for the 3,000 workers. The dam threatened to cause incalculable damage to the indigenous populations of the Mosquitia and to radically alter the ecosystems of the tropical rainforests – the remaining ‘continuous’ natural areas in which the indigenous populations still live.

MOPAWI recognized the need to warn the people of the region at all levels about the implications of the construction. Drawing on its links with a wide range of environmental, development and human rights organizations, MOPAWI formed a coalition that also included local governments and indigenous organizations. A detailed study of the project was conducted with expert advice in hydrology, geology and large-scale construction. The years spent developing the organization skills of the population were now going to be put to good use.

MOPAWI organized seminars, conferences and workshops to raise awareness of the issue. A weekly local radio programme allowed people express their reservations about the project. MOPAWI lobbied the central Government and the building companies to abandon the project. It drew attention to the evidence showing the non-viability of the project, the risks involved and the irreversible chaos it would cause. We used private
discussions, press conference and a public forum in the capital that brought together the Government, the building companies, the leaders of the indigenous organizations, environment groups and the media. We also contacted the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, together with other international investment organizations in order to inform them fully about the financial hazards involved in building a dam in that area and the social and environmental consequences. MOPAWI also involved associated organizations in the United Kingdom and the United States to exert external pressure on the Honduran Government and the constructing companies.

Results

As a result of the campaign the dam became an issue of national interest. When the companies realized that our arguments were well founded they became interested in dialogue. The coalition did not just protest against the construction of the dam. We also offered alternative solutions. We recognized the need to generate electricity and showed that a series of small dams built all over the country together with the use of solar, aeolian energy and energy from compost could provide sufficient electricity for the whole population. In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch swept over Honduras causing enormous damage to housing and environment. A survey conducted after the hurricane showed that even if the dam had survived the impact of the hurricane and resultant flooding, the debris would have made it unusable.

In March 1999 the companies withdrew from the Patuca II project. They said their decision was due to the intense local opposition. We believe it was also because they saw its non-viability. At the end of 1999 the National Congress granted the Patuca Medio the status of protected area. The World Bank, through its Global Environment Facilities, has initiated a programme for the preservation of the biodiversity in the reserve. In January 2001 MOPAWI set up a pilot study looking at the restoration of a micro-basin in association with a project of sustainable development with the local population.

Impact

Today it seems clear that a large dam should not be built in the Patuca National Park and that initiatives should be put in place for the preservation of the environment and sustainable development. But it has taken years of sustained effort to reach the point where indigenous people have the confidence to claim property rights and to participate in the decision making. The indigenous populations are regaining self-esteem and pride of their culture. They are in the process of reaching a state of equality as creatures made in the image of God. From being ignored 20 years ago, community organizations are now strong enough to claim their rights and negotiate at the highest levels of government. They are making alliances with specialist agencies.

The campaigns have helped to bring together indigenous and non-indigenous communities who share the same conditions of poverty. They have understood that they share the same agenda and that they can achieve more
by working together. The relationship with the world of business still requires attention. Not all the enterprises in the region realize the importance of recognising indigenous people as citizens with equal rights.

Evaluation

The campaign taught us the importance of:

- working in coalition with all the groups affected - community organizations, local governments, specialist development and environmental agencies
- having a good knowledge of the issue – the nature of the problem, your allies and opponents, and the strengths and weaknesses of your case
- maintaining a continuous and transparent dialogue between leaders, communities and allies
- studying carefully the case for and against the issue with the help of professional specialists

In this way we built a case that caught the attention of major players. Opposition to the dam grew and consolidated. Finally, the damage wrought by Hurricane Mitch showed the campaign was correct to question viability of the dam. The construction companies perhaps recognized that the campaign gave them the opportunity to avoid financial disaster.