

# **Human Rights and Agribusiness in Guatemala: large-scale monoculture and land grabbing**

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The human rights situation in Guatemala has changed little in the 18 years since the signing of the Peace Accords. Despite some progress in political and institutional matters, levels of poverty, violence, social exclusion and concentration of economic and political power have not changed. National and international economic policy has promoted large-scale foreign as well as domestic investment in natural resource extraction – whether through agro-export industries and monoculture expansion, metallic mining, or hydroelectric projects. Rather than benefitting local communities, these investments have led to social conflict in various parts of the country that have often turned violent, and communities have faced significant obstacles in getting access to justice.

The violence that often arises in the context of social conflicts tends to be targeted at those who stand with the vulnerable to defend human rights, since they may be identified as obstacles to development of a particular project. Defending human rights and empowering citizens to challenge widespread inequality can be seen as threatening the privileges of some in positions of power.

The land grab case in the Polochic Valley illustrates the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane monocultures. This expansion has led to the displacement of many indigenous and campesino communities that have lost their land, and thus their traditional livelihoods, thereby dramatically worsening the situation of malnutrition in the country.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights requested on 20 June 2011 that the Guatemalan government adopt [precautionary measures](#) to prevent irreparable harm to approximately 800 Maya Q'eqchi families. These families had been violently displaced by government forces in March of that year, at the request of the owner of the land and sugarcane mill Chabil Utzaj, which had violated several laws and protocols, as well as individual human rights. The resolution of the Inter-American Commission called on the Guatemalan government to adopt the necessary measures to guarantee the lives and physical integrity of evicted families, as well as provide them with humanitarian assistance, including food and housing for the 14 evicted communities.

After the evicted families marched over 200 km – an important mobilization of rural communities referred to as the Campesino March – then President Otto Pérez Molina publicly and formally committed to provide land to 300 families per year so that by mid-2015, all of the evicted families from Polochic would have their own parcel of land where they could grow their own food and live in dignity. An international petition urging the government to fulfill its commitment delivered 107,000 signatures from 55 countries, which helped push the government to make good on its promise and provide land to the first 140 families in October 2013.

Yet the land provided to these 140 families was not accompanied by other support required for them to resettle in dignified living conditions and re-establish their livelihoods. They received little if any assistance with materials for housing or agricultural production, or with regard to access to food and water. And the other 600 families are still waiting to receive land and are living in very vulnerable conditions.

In order to fully understand the situation in which these families were living and determine what urgent actions were required to respond to their needs, the CUC decided to undertake a food security and nutrition assessment in June 2015.

The report produced revealed that 6 out of every 10 children of the evicted families suffer from chronic malnutrition, that acute malnutrition is double that reported among similar populations in the same department (Alta Verapaz), and that the diet of 77 percent of families is inadequate both in terms of the amount of food and its nutrition value. In addition, poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water are causing increased morbidity.

Families that have yet to receive land, as of October 2015, continue to live in very difficult conditions. The communities have become dispersed throughout the Polochic area. Some are living with other family members or renting housing, while others have returned to occupy the land from which they were evicted while waiting to be compensated by the government.

Some progress has recently been made in negotiations with the government's Secretariat for Agrarian Issues and the Land Bank, enabling the government to purchase a new farm in the Polochic area known as Polochic River 2. Although the purchase has not yet been finalized, 85 families have been resettled there but with inadequate living conditions. Negotiations are also underway for the government purchase of another farm where about 60 families can resettle. The concern now is with the slow nature of the process as well as the difficult conditions for the families to resettle. The conditions in which the first 140 resettled families are living are still somewhat precarious, while the living conditions of the 85 families resettled in Polochic 2 are entirely inadequate.

The government institutions responsible for resolving the situation of the evicted families from Polochic urgently need to coordinate efforts to ensure that all families receive land and are able to resettle with dignified living conditions. All aspects stipulated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights when it requested precautionary measures for the evicted Polochic families must be fulfilled.

The violent eviction of communities from the Polochic Valley is an emblematic case that illustrates the situation faced by many other communities across Guatemala. Another example is a recent case of conflict over land now under oil palm cultivation by the REPSA company, which is accused of massive chemical waste contamination of the Pasión river in the department of Petén. That conflict has led to the assassination of a community leader and the kidnapping of three others, crimes which remain in impunity.

Guatemala needs to promote and invest in economic development alternatives to large-scale monoculture for export and natural resource extraction that destroy indigenous and campesino communities, undermining their culture and traditions as well as their livelihoods. Such agro-export and extractive projects have notoriously failed to respect indigenous communities' right to have free, prior and informed consent for all projects affecting them. Public resources should instead be invested in family farming to improve the livelihoods of the rural population.

In order to help address these challenges and, in particular, resolve the problems faced by the evicted families of Polochic, we ask Members of US Congress to consider the following actions:

1. Visit the Polochic Valley in Guatemala in order to see first-hand the conditions in which the 140 resettled families are living, as well as the situation of the other 629 evicted families waiting to receive land.

2. Request that the US Ambassador to Guatemala, Todd Robinson, actively monitor the situation of the evicted families and push the Guatemalan government to accelerate the process to give land to and ensure adequate conditions for all families to resettle and be able to live with dignity.
3. Strongly urge the Guatemalan government to fully comply with the precautionary measures requested by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.