



Guatemala Peacebuilding Initiative – June 2009

Executive Summary

I. Purpose

The primary objectives of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's June 2009 work in Guatemala, part of the Guatemala Peacebuilding Initiative, included increasing contacts, expanding knowledge on specific national and regional issues and convening a workshop on the propensity for social conflict (*conflictividad social*) in the department of Quiché. The workshop was sponsored with other organizations and opened doors to potential partners for future programs. Particularly important was the connection with the Centro de Paz Bárbara Ford, where the workshop was held. The workshop advanced participants' and the institute's awareness about the nature of social conflict in Quiché, the work already being done to address it, gaps that remain and priority actions for future work.

The trip also served several other purposes: to support research by a student in the M.A. in Peace and Justice Studies program, both for the M.A. capstone project and in assistance to faculty research at the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies (KSPS); to establish/nurture contacts in the Ixil area of Quiché for possible future IPJ work; and to reconnect with Guatemala City contacts including Catholic Relief Services and the United States Embassy.

In the immediate future, the workshop's approximately 30 participants agreed to continue their discussions on July 21 and August 12. These subsequent meetings will focus on the nature of networks in the region and the merits and potential drawbacks of forming a network on social conflict. In the longer term, the institute would like to explore – with the KSPS and Community Service Learning and other departments across the University of San Diego (USD) – possibilities for engagement with actors identified during the trip.

II. Historical Context

The civil war of 1960 to 1996 exacted the heaviest human toll in the western highlands. This legacy is everywhere present, even a generation later. It is evident among former members of the Communities of Population in Resistance – civilian populations displaced by the

scorched-earth tactics of the Guatemalan army and forced to survive in the mountain forests; former members of the civil defense patrols, comprised of those civilians who stayed behind and were compelled to “volunteer” for patrol of their villages against rebel incursions during the war; and the general population that alternately is hesitant to become involved in efforts at building social cohesion yet has repeatedly been involved in lynching presumed criminals.

III. Insights – The Propensity for Social Conflict in Quiché

The department of Quiché is in the heart of the indigenous-majority western highlands and exemplifies four areas of propensity toward social conflict that are arguably the most salient in current-day Guatemala: 1) conflict over land, exacerbated by poverty and lack of access to resources; 2) lack of access to justice, which has led to the emergence of vigilantism, and is sharpened by differences over the application of traditional indigenous justice and the disconnect between that system and the official justice system; 3) environmental conflicts, principally though not exclusively revolving around large hydroelectric dams; and 4) the legacy of conflict left among a population strongly affected, and in some way still divided, by the 36-year war of 1960 to 1996.¹ The workshop confirmed the relevance of these broad areas.

a. Lack of Access to Justice

The population of the department is majority indigenous, and indigenous Maya judicial customs remain very salient. In addition, in the 12 years since the signing of the peace accords, criminality and impunity have emerged as the most urgent problems in the country, together with the entrenched poverty and inequality that underpin them. Because the official justice system offers people little hope of protection from crime, or redress for victims, vigilantism has emerged as an increasingly prevalent and dangerous phenomenon.

b. Land Conflicts

The nature of land disputes varies from one department to another. In northern departments such as Alta Verapaz – where fellow convening organization Mercy Corps has its headquarters and first developed its land conflict resolution program – the problem is typically one of large landholders versus landless or smallholders. By contrast, in Quiché and in particular the Ixil area, the problem tends more to be one of land abandoned by those fleeing the conflict and then resettled by other, oftentimes equally dispossessed, families. Nonetheless, conflicts between large landowners and smallholders also exist.

¹ *Prevenir y Transformar: Conflictividad Social en los Departamentos de Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, y Quiché.* Programa de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz y Reconciliación Nacional, PCON-GTZ. Guatemala City, Guatemala: November 2008.

c. Women

The devastation of the war created so many widows that one of Guatemala's premier human rights organizations and women's organizations is the National Coordinating Body of Widows of Guatemala. Less visible, because a source of shame, was the sexual violence visited upon women. Domestic violence is also a serious and widespread problem. In addition, women and girls face challenges such as unequal access to education and scant economic opportunities.

d. Youth

In a culture that explicitly defers to elders, the challenges facing youth can and do lead to a perception that youth are a "problem" to be "managed." It is said that in recent years, gangs have spread from Guatemala City to the interior via young people who leave the provinces to go work in the city and then return, bringing gang culture with them. Certainly, in many cases the absence of parents from the home, oftentimes due to migration north, seems to be a serious problem. At the same time, the vibrancy of youth was evident in those workshop participants who are seeking to increase the political awareness and activism of their peers, using digital technology among other means to do so.

IV. Convening Organizations

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the three other convening organizations were: Centro de Paz Bárbara Ford, which provided the venue and staffing for the conference; Mercy Corps; and Propaz.

The Centro de Paz Bárbara Ford is a newly-established peace center located in Chajbal on the outskirts of Santa Cruz del Quiché, the capital of the department of Quiché. The director and staff have over a decade of experience working in mental health in that department with survivors of the conflict and domestic violence. The center has recently built a large, comfortable and well-designed facility that it is beginning to be used as a hub for its organizing efforts.

Mercy Corps is a U.S.-based international development organization with headquarters in Portland, Ore. In Guatemala, its national headquarters is in Cobán, the capital of Alta Verapaz, which is the department immediately to the east of northern Quiché. Mercy Corps works with local partner organizations to peacefully resolve land conflicts. Mercy Corps and the Centro Ford had entered into collaboration together by the time the institute contacted the latter in March 2009.

Fundación Propaz is an independent, private, nonprofit organization with a staff of about 20, located in Guatemala City. The activities of Propaz include facilitation, training, consciousness-raising and systematization and documentation of its work. Propaz has likewise established collaboration with the Centro Ford.

V. Workshop Description and Follow-Up

The day-and-a-half-long workshop on social conflict took place on July 17 and 18, in the village of Chajbal on the outskirts of Santa Cruz del Quiché, capital of the department of Quiché. Representatives of 25 organizations, including civil society groups, universities, donor agencies and local- and departmental-level government agencies participated.

VI. Supplementary Interviews in Nebaj and Guatemala City

After the workshop, three of the team members continued on to Nebaj in the Ixil area and held a series of meetings and interviews with a range of actors, including past members of the Communities of Population in Resistance; an evangelical pastor and community leader; the Catholic priest of the parish; a researcher and expert on indigenous justice systems; and a doctoral candidate conducting research and working with a women's peace group comprised of widows and other survivors of the war, with which the team also met. The analysis of the conflict context in the section above draws not only upon the workshop but also upon those interviews and papers and publications produced by some of the interviewees. In Guatemala City, further meetings were held with Catholic Relief Services, at the U.S. Embassy and at Propaz at the Universidad Rafael Landívar.

VII. Products

a. Participation in Discussions in Quiché

The institute plans to continue to follow and, to the extent possible, participate in the ongoing meetings that are taking up the question of whether to set up a network of networks on social conflict in the department of Quiché. Doing so will make it possible to discern the types of activities the IPJ can catalyze in support of such a network: e.g., trainings, exchanges with other peace-building organizations, etc. In addition, such participation enriches awareness for IPJ staff and KSPS students alike.

b. KSPS Research on Land Conflict and Social Resilience

The research being conducted by the KSPS faculty and graduate student is expected to inform the institute's future initiatives. At the same time, the workshop described above provided some of the inputs to the research itself.

c. January Intersession Course

The institute will work with USD's Community Service Learning to staff a January intersession course in Guatemala offered through USD's School of Leadership and Education Sciences. This will be the second year of IPJ participation in this ongoing course, and will offer the opportunity to build in additional meetings with key actors in Guatemala. It also brings institute contacts and knowledge to the January course. While the course is currently designed for graduate students in nonprofit management, M.A. students in the KSPS will be invited to participate.

VII. Conclusion and Next Steps

In conclusion, there is no dearth of directions that the institute could take that would fall broadly within the Guatemala Peacebuilding Initiative. For the present, the institute plans to organize a panel discussion about the June trip, scheduled for September 3. The KSPS will continue to conduct field research on land conflict and social resiliency; and as mentioned above, the School of Leadership and Education Sciences has invited the institute to again participate in its January intersession trip to Guatemala.