

Bulletin No.

50



**making space for peace**

## PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT



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# “The only way forward is to keep fighting”:

CPR-Sierra 25 years after its arrival in El Triunfo



The CPR-Sierra flag at the start of the commemorative walk in El Triunfo on the anniversary on September 23, 2023.

## Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR): an example of mutual support for survival

The collective book “El camino de las palabras de los pueblos” (The Path of the Peoples’ Words) draws on the memory of the indigenous peoples of northern Quiché. It explores how the Communities of Populations in Resistance (CPR) were a way people found to survive the state terror and its scorched earth policy that was carried out by the army throughout 1980s in the cruelest years of the “counter-insurgency war.”

Within this context of terror, the communities in this region<sup>1</sup> had few alternatives. One was to surrender to the army and live in villages controlled by the military and providing compulsory service in the Civil Self-Defense Patrols (PAC). Another was to migrate to the capital, other regions of the country or abroad. There were also those who joined the guerrilla movements. But the alternative we discuss here relates to those who sought to resist and survive in the inaccessible hills and mountains, dodging army attacks.

This last option was taken by a multitude of families, and it was the strategy that allowed them to survive for 17 years. In the north of Quiché they found places that were difficult access but which provided shelter for many people and places to grow crops, keep animals and seeds. All this was possible thanks to an incredible level of organization, through which responsibilities were shared in various areas such as coordination, communication, production and trade, education, health and security.<sup>2</sup>

Living conditions in the CPRs were harsh. Food was scarce and every family experienced the death of a loved one for various reasons: hunger, disease, regular attacks by the army on people, crops, animals and other belongings. “The army destroyed our corn and they destroyed these very often. We spent six or eight months with nothing. We didn’t even have any herbs, we only ate banana root. Some died of hunger, others managed to go elsewhere to look for fish.” “Of my family, 18 died of hunger.”<sup>3</sup>

The support of other communities in the region also helped them to survive: “The solidarity of our brothers from Cabá, Sumal Grande, Salquil and other communities [was very important], they sent us food. These journeys of solidarity were long, with many days, 10 or 12, walking at night, evading fences, military patrols, civil patrols, but

1 According to the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), the department of El Quiché suffered the highest percentage of recorded violations, 46%, followed by Huehuetenango with 16%. Between 1979 and 1983 they counted 250 massacres in the six municipalities of El Quiché: Cunén (6); Cotzal (31); Chajul (62); Nebaj (90); Scapulas (30) and Uspantán (31).

2 Iniciativa para la Reconstrucción y Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, *El camino de las palabras de los pueblos*. Magna Terra editores. Guatemala 2013, p. 250-251.

3 Ibidem, p. 223.



they finally managed to bring maize, seed and malanga.”<sup>4</sup>

As Rigoberta Menchú Tum points out, the CPRs were an example of community organization, “a challenge to the established order, to de facto violence, to state terrorism. And not only because they were survivors, but because they organized themselves to reject what their perpetrators represented: death, violence, humiliation, inhumanity. And they were persecuted for that, for having defeated death and for having told their story, a story that is also the story of the people of Guatemala, a story that speaks of the struggle for justice, for peace, for dignity and for better living conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

**“In reality, the army never came to our lands to fight the guerrillas, they came for our lands and in one way or another they stayed with our lands.” (J.T.T.)<sup>6</sup>**

#### **The state failed to fulfill its commitments**

In June 1994, the Agreement for the Resettlement of Populations Uprooted by the Armed Conflict was signed. The purpose of this agreement was to recognize “the traumatic national dimension of uprooting during the armed confrontation in the country,

in its human, cultural, material, psychological, economic, political and social components, which caused human rights violations and great suffering for the communities that were forced to abandon their homes and ways of life.” For this reason, the Government of the Republic undertook a commitment “to ensure the conditions that allow and guarantee the voluntary return of uprooted persons to their places of origin or to the place of their choice, in conditions of dignity and security.” In December 1996, the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace was signed, which ended the conflict and allowed the previously negotiated agreements to enter into force.



The mural in the community hall of El Triunfo, 23.09.2023.

4 Ibidem, p. 224.

5 Moller, J., Menchú Tum, R., Falla, R., Goldman, F. y Jonas, S., *Nuestra cultura es nuestra resistencia. Represión, refugio y recuperación en Guatemala*. Editorial Océano de México. México, 2004.

6 Iniciativa para la Reconstrucción y Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, Op.Cit, p. 253

“The proposal of the CPR-Sierra was to remain in the areas of resistance in the north of Chajul, to expand that territory for (re)settlement or (re)location, buying neighboring lands that were for sale, with the aim of forming a larger area in which the majority of the population that had carried out civil resistance in the area could settle. The objective was precisely to avoid dispersion, to remain in the region and not outside it, geographically dispersed, to consolidate the form of organization that had been in place during the armed conflict, which had proved to be successful, effective and efficient.”<sup>7</sup>

This proposal was rejected by the government. The state was looking for the exact opposite and did not accept the return of the population to their places of origin. Everything possible was done to divide the communities, so that they would live in different regions. In addition, internal fractures were created by offering them land that they had to manage through companies, insufficient land for the needs of the families and land parcels of different sizes. This caused internal conflicts in the beneficiary communities. Subsequently, the state granted land concessions for the development of mega-projects. This was the case of the Xacbal and Xacbal Delta hydroelectric plants on the Xacbal River, authorised in 2010 and 2012 respectively, without informing the population of the region.<sup>8</sup>

Faced with this situation, some 1,300 families from the CPR-Sierra took on the challenge of settling in places outside the areas of resistance, while they waited for the land that the state promised to provide them with. 350



Ixil and K'iche's neighbours in front of the Monument to the Martyrs and Heroes who gave their lives to defend the rights of the peoples in resistance during the internal armed conflict 1960 to 1996 at the end of the commemorative walk., 23.09.2023.

families moved to Finca El Triunfo, located in Champerico, Retalhuleu. Virgilio García Carrillo, a member of the CPR-Sierra and one of the leaders of this community, explains that the land was not bought by the state. It was bought with funds from international churches that were obtained thanks to the international work carried out by the CPR delegations. “Unfortunately the government just shelved the Peace Accords and never followed up. For these new settlements the commitments were mainly land, decent housing, health, education, economic and technical funds for production, but this did not happen. The government did not take responsibility. They gave 100 small houses and there were 350 families, 100 small, unfinished houses,

they were half built. The people had to look for ways to finish them. The Peace Accords were not fulfilled, land was given to us but it was bought purely with international support.”<sup>9</sup>

As Virgilio points out, not all the people from the CPR-Sierra went to El Triunfo; they dispersed to different departments and communities in the country: “The first farm that was bought was El Tesoro, in Uspantán, where 450 families settled. The second was the community of Maryland (in Retalhuleu), where 300 families settled. Then it was El Triunfo, where 350 families arrived. Other people returned to Nebaj to different communities; in total we were 23 CPR communities.<sup>10</sup> Not all of us went to the same place.”

7 Iniciativa para la Reconstrucción y Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, Op.Cit, p. 272.

8 Ibídem, p. 280-285.

9 Interviewed on June 14, 2023

10 They were originally distributed in 9 farms located in different departments: 4 in Nebaj and 1 in Uspantán, in Quiché; 2 in Retalhuleu; 1 in Suchitepéquez and 1 in Chimaltenango. But in 1998 Hurricane Mitch completely destroyed the Maryland farm in Retalhuleu and made it uninhabitable, so the families settled in other farms in the area or returned to the Ixil area.



## La llegada a la tierra prometida, otro reto para las CPR

“We left Chajul on September 24, 1998 and arrived here on the 25th. There were 350 families from Nebaj, Chajul, Cotzal, Chinique (Quiché), Chiantla (Huehuetenango) and Sololá”. But just then Hurricane Mitch hit the country from October 27 to November 4 of that year. Virgilio says that everything that had been achieved so far was destroyed, so some people got discouraged and 74 families returned to Quiché.

The situation that the 350 families found when they arrived was not what they expected, they had to live crowded together: “There were only two halls and 100 little huts prepared by a group that had gone ahead beforehand, with state funds, nothing

more. Those who already had families of six to eight people were given one of the little houses. They were small houses with nylon sheeting around them and 6 or 8 metal sheets on the roof. We stayed in these small groups of houses for a year at the beginning. Then the land committee measured the land (11 caballerías) and distributed it. Each family built their own little house, with tin sheets on top and nylon around them. My parents, brothers and sisters were my neighbors. After 4 or 5 years, the European Community built us these houses in which we live now, for the whole community, 275 families, of three cement sheets and bamboo on top”.

Apart from the issue of housing, people had to look for ways to survive, generate income to buy seeds to grow. Most people went to work in neighboring villages, others to the sugar mill farms

that were nearby, not as close as they are now though.

Those were hard years, as the land turned out to be very poor and the weather conditions did not help either: “there was a year when we sowed *milpa* (ancestral system of planting corn, beans and squash together), but we did not get a harvest because there was a drought and the *milpa* was lost.” Previously, this land was used to grow cotton, but just before the arrival of the families, it had been used as a cattle ranch. Because of this, the land was very worn out and badly burnt from the use of chemical products. They didn’t know any of this when they decided to move to this land. They thought that because it had been a farm there would be development, but that was not the case. They came from a cold land and arrived in a hot land without much rain:



In the maize fields of the community sesame grows among the banded bushes, 22.09.2023.

“for us it was a very sudden change; we didn’t expect it.”

According to Virgilio, in the early years “there was nothing to eat, there were no vegetables. We were used to eating vegetables that were produced in the fields, in the milpas, where there were all kinds of vegetables. There was corn, beans, güisquil, turnip, greens, all that. But here there were no vegetables, there was nothing, you had to go to Retalhuleu or Champerico to buy them. Now, every day, trucks and carts pass by selling products, because they see that there are people and they come to sell.” So the families began to plant corn for their own consumption and sesame to sell: “if some corn comes up, they also sell a little bit or exchange it for vegetables.” “Beans are very scarce, because here there is only one type of bean that grows, called *ixtapacal*. The cold earth bean, the bush bean or the pole bean, doesn’t grow here because this is very hot soil. The only thing that has been achieved here and that has been a blessing is soya, which is used to make cheese and milk. That did happen, but there was another hurricane when we sowed it and it destroyed everything. We raised it, we cut it, but it didn’t grow, the seed was lost. So “here there is only one annual harvest of milpa, because the winter is very short. Sesame is sown in August, between the furrows of the corn, when the corn is already bending.” However, there is a lot of fruit, “mango, coconut, jocote, cashew... we plant them for our own consumption. There is not much to sell because there is not enough land to grow it on, because if we plant in the good places, there is nowhere to plant the milpa, and if we have some cows for breeding, we also need pasture for them to eat.”

Eventually cattle became the main source of income in El Triunfo, but to keep them, land is needed: “At least we

don’t work on the farms any more. The first few years we did, to ensure our survival, but then we didn’t. What my late father told me when we came here, is still fresh in my mind: before, we used to go down like pigs, like cattle, in trucks to the coasts, to the farms, but now we have a piece of land, it’s a shame that we go to work for the rich.”

### Sugar mills, water scarcity and criminalization

Virgilio says that when they arrived 25 years ago, they were surrounded by cattle farms, there was no sugar cane. However, about 10 years ago, when the sugar mills were already operating, water began to run short: “Our wells dried up because the sugar cane farms use the water day and night to irrigate their plantations. The companies come to throw poisons, they come to fumigate with planes, they come to burn the cane, so everything is polluted, and the rivers are blocked and they take the water for their sugar cane fields, for their banana plantations, for their palm trees, it causes so much damage. The

wells in the communities, in the fields, have dried up because the farmers dig deep wells. That’s why we started to fight against the sugar cane farms. “We have already learned that this is a dry strip of land that goes from here to the Mexican border, to Puerto Barrios, Izabal. However, there was always some rain here, but when the sugar cane companies came, they cut down all the trees and burned them. It used to be greener all around and despite the drought there was water.

In 2015, the communities affected by the sugarcane companies began to organize: “they invited us to a meeting where 18 communities attended. They elected one person from each community to form a council to address the problems of water, the use rivers, the drying up of lakes, the felling of trees, to protect mother earth. I was the auxiliary mayor at the time and it was my turn to go with COCODE to the meeting of the 18 communities. I became president of this Council of Communities, but the sugarcane companies sued four of us because



Education has always been a priority for the members of the CPR. Already during their life in the mountains, they taught children and youth to read and write. When they arrived in the community of El Triunfo, Virgilio recalls, they built the first school “in the mud and in the rain”. Eventually they managed to establish primary, secondary and basic education, and today students come from neighbouring communities. El Triunfo, 22.09.2023.



of our involvement in the organization and that is why we experienced criminalization. For four or five years we couldn't leave the department, we were under house arrest and we had to sign a register in Champerico on the 15th of every month. That was the problem we had, but thank God, we were happy when it was solved on 30 May 2023 and we were free. We did a good job, because now there are new communities where there used to be sugar cane. For example, the land of the Mam de Cajolá community, down here, used to be sugarcane, but the owner sold the land to the community."

Another problem they face today is the lack of land, as El Triunfo has almost doubled in population and is now home to some 500 families. The land that was initially allocated to each family, 50 cuerdas, is not enough to distribute among the daughters and sons when they create their own families. The community established the agreement that land can only be sold among residents, as a form of protection for the community itself.

The lack of land, but also the lack of opportunities, increases migration to the U.S.. Migratory movements started

about eight years after arriving in the community. Since then, entire families have left, leaving other family members to take care of their land and houses. Virgilio himself has two children who emigrated and he sees that this situation has no solution for the moment because "you can't buy land, or build a good house, because there is no money, no income, because here we are barely surviving." Despite this situation, most people who migrate do so with the idea of returning one day.



Next to the school is a Cultural Centre which offers a library and a computer centre. El Triunfo, 22.09.2023.



# Climate crisis increases

food insecurity for thousands of families

## Some facts to get started

Guatemala has been experiencing the second most severe crisis of food security in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2020.<sup>1</sup> By 2022 21.1% of the country's population was severely food insecure.<sup>2</sup> This percentage increased to 26 per cent in 2023, while 58% of the population was marginally food insecure, i.e. at risk of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> The increase in chronic undernutrition in children under five years of age is of particular concern. In the school going population, the highest percentages are among indigenous children. In fact, Guatemala currently ranks sixth in the world in terms of the worst rates of child malnutrition. In some rural regions, where the majority of the population is of Mayan origin, child malnutrition rates reach 80%.<sup>4</sup>

Guatemala faced several anomalous climatic phenomena in 2023, such as the extremely late rainy season, strong winds, torrential rains and low temperatures. This is of great concern among the indigenous and peasant population, as it has a huge impact on their crops. For example, most of the more than 200 communities in the municipality of Ixcán (Quiché) suffered heavy losses caused by the prolonged drought that damaged the milpa (ancestral system of growing corn, beans

and squash together). On the other hand, in the north of Huehuetenango, heavy rains accompanied by wind caused the total destruction of crops, mainly milpa which is the main source of subsistence. Due to the delay in the rainfall, several farmers lost up to half of their crops and, when the rains finally did come, they were so strong that they destroyed everything, as well as causing land and mudslides.<sup>5</sup> An unusual cold snap in mid-December caused temperatures in the west and the highlands to drop to zero degrees Celsius. The frosts froze crops and pasture for animals. There were regions where temperatures reached three degrees below zero and where sheep were found dead in the morning

and cows' milk production dropped. Farmers are very worried because their livelihoods depend on these activity.<sup>6</sup>

## Climate and food situation in regions where PBI accompanies

Part of PBI's work includes visits to the communities we accompany. One of the struggles of these communities is the defense of their right to food. Unfortunately, we have been able to verify in-situ the increasingly precarious situation in which many peasant and indigenous families find themselves.

One of the regions affected is the South Coast. Abelino Mejía, from the Council of Communities of Retalhuleu (CCR)<sup>7</sup> has highlighted how this year



Milpa in the South Coast has not developed as expected due to lack of rain, Champerico, 15.06.2023.

- 1 Colectivo Social por el Derecho a la Alimentación, *Informe Alternativo del Derecho a la Alimentación en Guatemala. Monitoreo de las directrices voluntarias para el derecho a la alimentación*, 2023.
- 2 CARE, *Guatemala: Una realidad constante de inseguridad alimentaria*, Octubre 2023.
- 3 Programa Mundial de Alimentos, *Evaluación Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria para Guatemala*, Agosto 2023.
- 4 <https://www.unicef.es/noticia/desnutricion-en-guatemala> (data extracted from this link January 16, 2024).
- 5 Pablo, E., *Lluvias con viento destruyen siembras de milpa en Huehuetenango*, Prensa Comunitaria, 14.07.2023.
- 6 Oxom, E. y Batz, L., *Agricultores del altiplano afectados por helada histórica*, Prensa Comunitaria, 20.12.2023.
- 7 Interviewed on January 5, 2024.





Melons are grown in home gardens on the South Coast. Champerico, 3.05.2023.

they had a very dry winter with heavy losses of milpa and vegetables. In July, almost 65% of the milpa had already dried.<sup>8</sup> “This will impoverish peasant families even more, because it will produce more malnutrition. The lack of corn, beans, cassava, squash and peas, causes great food shortages and malnutrition, which especially affects children. It is really painful, in each community there are 20 or 30 children who are malnourished. Although the State institutions do not want to accept it, this is the sad reality that the peasants are facing and it is being repeated every year, because the families are losing their crops due to the lack of water.”.

Abelino points out that the summer (dry season) is becoming longer and longer and drought is increasing in the region. The massive production of sugar cane has a lot to do with this as “rivers, streams and springs are drying up, because the sugar cane plantations monopolize the water and cause us

great harm, because families want to continue planting in the summer but they have no way to irrigate.”

Another region of concern is Las Verapaces. We spoke with William Pop,<sup>9</sup> a 24-year-old Maya Poqomám and member of the Verapaz Union of Peasant Organizations (UVOC). He coordinates the work on rural development and family agriculture within the organization and explains that “normally the first rains come in May, but this year they did not arrive until July. This affected many communities that traditionally plant corn, because the heat meant that the seeds never sprouted, so the families had to plant again two weeks later. And then, when the rain came, it was very intense and for a very short period of time. That’s why the harvest was so poor. Normally we harvest in September, but this year we had to wait until October and the production was very low. This is because of the weather. Families

now see their food threatened and it is a serious problem, because they will have to buy in the market and the price is very high; corn is at Q200 per quintal when it normally costs between Q75 and Q100. Those who produce in large quantities have taken advantage of the scarcity by selling the product at a higher price.

Regarding the food situation in Olopa (Chiquimula) - another of the regions where PBI provides accompaniment - it must be said that this year has improved. We spoke with Ubaldino García,<sup>10</sup> coordinator of the Maya Ch’orti’ Indigenous Council of Olopa, who shared with us that this year the rain has been very favorable for the communities. In addition, thanks to the struggle of the resistance against the mine operating in the region, they were able to secure the suspension of the mining activities and this has made more water available for the families. Although he points out that they have also experienced strange variations during the rainy season, there were no severe droughts in 2023, so they managed to harvest the crops that were planted. “It was a very good crop year for the lower part of Olopa.” However, this year’s favorable weather has not ensured enough food for the majority of the population, as the land available for planting is scarce. According to Ubaldino, the historical dispossession of land that they have experienced in this region is the root cause of the lack of food security. “Families have very little land to cultivate. And the lowlands<sup>11</sup> are only enough to grow grains such as corn, beans and coffee, and often there is not enough to plant and harvest for the year. Meanwhile, in the

8 Facebook entrance by Community Council on Food Sovereignty on the South Coast, 28.07.2023.

9 Interviewed on December 28, 2023.

10 Interviewed on December 30, 2023.

11 Refers to land that is less than 1,000 meters above sea level, such as the communities of La Prensa, El Carrizal, Cerrón and Paternito.

highlands they only grow coffee,<sup>12</sup> so they depend on selling coffee at a good price in order to buy food products. Therefore, families tend to get into debt and ask their employers for money, which they aim to pay back with the sale of the little coffee crop they have.” However, this year the coffee market is complicated “because the price is very low, at half of last year’s price. This has serious consequences for the nutrition of families and children because coffee is the crop they rely on and it is only harvested once a year, so all year long it has to be cared for, cleaned, fertilized.... And if in the end they don’t get a good price, it’s difficult to pay off the debt.” So, “despite the fact that Olopa, being the highest municipality in the region, has better land and a better climate, it has a cultivation model that puts the food situation in general and particularly that of children at risk.”

This context of instability and precarity encourages migration to the north, where the work is better paid, in order to sustain life. “Now in Olopa there are

many families migrating, many young people and many members of the resistance. To finance the migration most of the land is used as collateral for payments to the coyotes. And migration is not always successful, so many families have lost their land. And that makes the food situation more complicated.

### Causes of the food crisis and proposals to deal with it

We spoke with David Paredes, an environmentalist, activist for the right to food and coordinator of the National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty in Guatemala (REDSAG),<sup>13</sup> in order to better understand the situation, its causes and some of the proposals to address it. There is still no official data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (MAGA) for 2023. The information they do have comes from direct observation in the field, where there have been significant losses to corn crops. This “is especially due to irregular rainfall,

one of the impacts of the climate crisis we are experiencing. Drought makes plant growth impossible, or else excess rain leads to increased pests, both of which cause crop losses. One of the important consequences is the rise in the prices of corn and beans and some vegetables in the market, which affects the economy of families.”

According to Paredes, the causes of the current food crisis have deep and systemic roots. In the 1960s, the implementation of the so-called “green revolution” began, which determined “the transformation of the agricultural production model by introducing the massive use of agrochemicals. At the beginning it meant an increase in production, but with the passage of time it caused an increased dependency on these inputs as, under this model, the soil needs more and more chemicals to maintain the same levels of production, while at the same time its quality decreases. Dependence on chemical inputs makes production more expensive and many farming families do not have sufficient resources to access them. This, coupled with the climate crisis mentioned above, means that many farmers are forced to migrate to look for other opportunities to generate income to buy food, instead of producing it.

REDSAG has proposed the defense of food sovereignty as a remedy for these problems.<sup>14</sup> Food sovereignty “is the right of peoples to produce their own food in their own way. It is tied to the long tradition of food production of indigenous peoples. It defends water, land, territory, seeds and ancestral knowledge. Agroecology



Farmers from the Villa de Guadalupe community, part of UVOC, established a community garden where they grow celery, coriander, chard and spinach. They also produce their own organic fertiliser. Senahú, 20.01.2024.

<sup>12</sup> Refers to land that is more than 1,000 meters above sea level (especially suitable for coffee planting), such as the communities of La Cumbre, La Laguna, Los Planes, Tituque, Rublarcito and El Chute.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with David Paredes in our program ACÉRCATE “The situation of food insecurity and its consequences in Guatemala”, 12.09.2023. You can access it on our website: <https://pbi-guatemala.org/es/multimedia/ac%C3%A9rcate>

<sup>14</sup> Food sovereignty is a concept developed by La Vía Campesina and brought to public debate at the 1996 World Food Summit. For more information see: [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)



is the food production system that makes it possible to move towards food sovereignty within a framework of sustainability, biodiversity conservation and the promotion of local peasant production contrary to the agro-industrial model of food exports and imports.” In fact, several peasant and indigenous organizations have been working for years to recover ancestral practices and agroecology as a solution to food insecurity.”

According to Abelino from the CCR, the practice of establishing and maintaining “family gardens helps us to improve the children’s nutrition, because we plant blackberry, chipilín, squash, casava, sweet potato, malanga, tomato, chili, carrot, beet, onion, various herbs, salad cucumber, sweet cucumber, Creole melon,.... All this helps families to feed their children. This is how we have seen how children are overcoming malnutrition.” Given the lack of rainwater on the South Coast, the families reuse the water used to wash the dishes, among other things, to irrigate the vegetable garden. “The gardens are of great importance to us, because families with little water no longer lack food. Next year, the CCR wants to implement water harvesters<sup>15</sup> and provide the material to build them in each house.”

William from UVOC says that they grow vegetables, sweet potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, chives, cilantro, parsley, celery and other herbs in the family gardens. Some families manage to sell part of the products from the home gardens in community markets organized among neighbors or in the

municipal market. “I estimate that we reduce food shortages by 30% through the family gardens. The planting of these vegetables and plants helps the economy of the families, because this way they don’t have to buy food.” In addition, “we have implemented the use of organic fertilizer because we have to take care of the soil and nature. We also try to implement the use of tinacas<sup>16</sup> in communities where water is scarce and where there is no piped water. On the edges of the roofs of the houses we have installed channels that capture rainwater and take it, through pipes, to the tinacas. In this way, families have water at home to use in the kitchen, to water their plants and to water their animals.

David from REDSAG comments that “Guatemala’s agrarian policy, and the measures to combat hunger, employ the complete opposite approach from the ones proposed by grassroots

organizations. The State does not recognize the importance of peasant labor and small-scale production which, according to the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations], provides 70% of the food consumed in the world. Guatemala voted against the declaration of peasant rights,<sup>17</sup> which is totally illogical if we think that the largest productive sector in Guatemala are small producers, while monocultures do not feed the population. MAGA has shifted funds from the budget allocated to the Family Agriculture Program for the Strengthening of the Peasant Economy to a welfarist food delivery program, which means that instead of financially supporting the production of quality food, the state uses public funds to give away low quality food, such as palm oil and processed industrial foods that are not necessarily nutritious, but ease hunger. That is what the Guatemalan government’s food security policy



The tinacos collect rainwater for use in the kitchen, for bathing and for watering the plants in the vegetable gardens. Sapalau Samutz, 17.01.2024.

15 “They are the instruments, works or infrastructures with which rainwater harvesting can be carried out in the most efficient and optimal way for later use. Generally structured from a catchment to later lead the water to a storage source.”( Extracted from: file:///home/vant/Descargas/Cosecha%20de%20Agua.pdf).

16 A tinaca is a plastic container that may hold 1,100 liters of water that lasts approximately two weeks.

17 The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas was adopted on December 17, 2018 during the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly. It was adopted with 121 votes in favor, 8 against (Australia, Guatemala, Hungary, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States) and 54 abstentions.

does: it takes away people's hunger regardless of the origin of the food. While food sovereignty recognizes ancestral knowledge, a millenary history of agriculture by the peoples that is the basis of the food that keeps us alive." The same thing happens in relation to the production system. Instead of

implementing the National Strategy for the Development of Organic and Agroecological Production,<sup>18</sup> which was produced in collaboration with several organizations, the MAGA prefers to work with assistance programs that deliver fertilizers and hybrid seeds that use a high percentage of chemicals,

which affect the soil and water and, consequently, the health of families, and which in some cases are even prohibited in other countries. These programs have not produced the desired results. There are the malnutrition rates to prove it."



"We have worked for six years with the communities to design the Biodiversity and Ancestral Knowledge Law initiative as part of our long-term strategy. We registered this legislative proposal as number 6086 in May 2022. The aim is to protect ancestral knowledge, so that indigenous peoples and peasants can participate in the administration of biodiversity together with State institutions, and to prohibit genetically modified crops and the misappropriation of seeds through their patenting." David Paredes, REDSAG coordinator.

<sup>18</sup> <https://visar.maga.gob.gt/visar/eao13.pdf>



# The problem of migration on the South Coast:

entire families forced to migrate for lack of opportunities

We visited several communities on the South Coast in June 2023. One of the issues that caught our attention was the fact that the majority of the population consisted of girls, boys, women and elderly people. When we asked where the young people and the men were, we were told that most of them had emigrated to work abroad. To explore this situation further, we arranged an interview with Abelino Mejía, representative of the Community Council of Retalhuleu, with whom we spoke about migration in this region.



Trucks with water tanks are filled into rivers to use the water for irrigation of sugar cane fields. Champerico, 29.03.2022.

## **PBI: How do you assess the impact of migration on the South Coast in recent years?**

Abelino: It has increased a lot over the last five years. Entire families have been forced to migrate because of the lack of opportunities, especially young people, and even children. When I say lack of opportunities, I'm referring to development, the government has not generated employment opportunities. There is no way to generate income. Although we have our little piece of land, we lack the capital to buy seeds to be able to work it, we can't plant. And if we plant in the summer, we lack water and the harvest doesn't come in. Sugar cane production, which is abundant in the area, does not provide employment, and if it does, it is poorly paid and exploitative. So young people and families try to migrate to have a better life, because there is no food, and if there is food they cannot cook it because they have no water. That's why they leave.

The government will never put an end to migration without development opportunities that reach families in need. There are some projects now, but these are politicized and don't reach those who really need them.

## **PBI: And what are the consequences of this migration for the communities?**

A: There are communities where there are only women, children and the elderly. The children between seven and eight years old are the only ones left, because they start migrating from the age of nine. A lot of the time they migrate alone, others go with their mothers, because often the father has already left but has stopped sending them resources. This situation greatly affects the communities, especially their development, because the children leave without even having finished primary school. It's not that people don't want to stay, but that there are no opportunities.

For example, a 12-year-old girl from my family migrated. Her dream was to study and there was no possibility here. It costs between Q300 and Q500 a month, and we can't afford that. She herself made the decision and told us so, because she knew that "here you can't study." Here, if you work on the [landlord's] farm, they pay you Q50 a day, which is barely enough to eat, depending on the price of the food staples. Faced with this situation, she herself told us that she preferred to migrate, despite the risks involved. Luckily she arrived safely, and now she is fulfilling her dream of studying. This is a clear example of how children do not see a future here in Guatemala, and





Irrigation in the sugar cane fields is often maintained for 24 hours, Champerico, 28.03.2022.

that is why they're forced to migrate. They're young but have the worries of grown-ups. Here the state does not exist, it is not present, and this causes large migration flows. We know there is a state, but it is never here with us, providing opportunities.

It hurts us when they go, when they leave the community, because they leave a void. And when only the father, or the mother and father, leave, the children are abandoned. The lack of opportunities, impoverishment and family disintegration also leads to an increase in delinquency and the formation of gangs. Because if children are not looked after by their parents, if they are left in the care of an aunt or uncle, they can't be given the same attention, so they go out onto the streets and can get involved in drugs or vandalism. That ends up affecting the whole community.



While the rivers used by the inhabitants of the communities to bathe, fetch water and feed their animals are getting lower and lower every year, Champerico, 14.03.2022.



**PBI: Migration is expensive. Let's talk about the indebtedness that families suffer when they decide that someone has to migrate.**

A: There are people who mortgage the deeds to their land as collateral. Travel costs between Q100,000 and Q160,000. It's expensive, but people take the risk because there are no opportunities, there is nothing else to do. They take out a loan and the interest rates are very high, and as they cannot pay, the bank finally takes the land. There are families who have been left in the street because they couldn't pay. I know many families who tried and now they are worse off.

In my community there are about 1,800 families and in the last two months more than 100 people have migrated. There are nine and 10 year old children who leave, they get to sixth grade and since they don't have the opportunity to continue studying basic education, they leave. There are also people who have disappeared. For example, last year a 16 year old migrated and couldn't make it, he disappeared, we don't know anything about him. When he left, he said goodbye to his mother, because they did not know if they would see each other again. If they arrive, they communicate with their families, but if they don't arrive, as in the case of this boy, he is presumed dead, because there is no more information.

**PBI: Of the 100 people from your community who migrated in the last two months, can you estimate how many reached their destination?**

A: In this case, 25 people have managed to reach the United States. Another 25, more or less, are working in Mexico, because the migration returned them to that country and they have stayed there. And the others have not been able to reach their destination, they have returned and their struggle continues. Some are now in El Salvador, selling peanuts or sweets. Others migrated to Belize



Water pumps draw water into water pipes that carry it to the sugar cane fields, Champerico, 3.05.2023.

because there are jobs there, there is the orange harvest. Others are outside the department of Retalhuleu, selling their goods to see how they can pay off their debts and support their families. Despite these situations, the families try again because there are no opportunities here.

**PBI: Do you know about the conditions in which migrants live?**

A: They are precarious conditions. My brother, who migrated, shares a room with five or six people so that he can get by economically, and he doesn't spend money. For example, he doesn't go out to dances because otherwise he spends money. The same goes for the other comrades who have left and with whom he shares a room. They draw lots for beds. My brother tells me that he has to sleep on a sofa, every other night. He works a day shift and a night shift, so they take turns sleeping. If they paid for the room alone, then they wouldn't be able to pay the debt.

They go with the idea of at least paying off their debt in three or four years. Then they have to spend another four years working to be able to buy a small piece of land, or build a house, or have a cow. Because that's the idea, to raise capital to have their animals or to start farming, to make progress. We are talking about a period of eight or 10 years before they can return. But if during that period the family disintegrates, they don't come back. Migration creates very critical situations, because it is very difficult for the family circle. Most of those who migrate don't return, they settle there and send for their father or mother to live with them. They get used to that life, because the food is better and there are more job opportunities. But there are those who do return, but if they haven't accumulated enough capital, they have to migrate again. It is a very difficult situation.

**PBI: Do you think there is a link between the expansion of sugar mill activities in the region and the increase in migration?**

A: When there was no sugar cane, there was a better economy, because it rained, the crops were not lost. Families were able to feed themselves. Families didn't start



migrating for fun, but for lack of food and water, that's why there is migration. In the past, few people migrated, not like now. Imagine, if in the last two months 100 people have migrated from my community, what is happening in other communities that are in a more difficult situation than mine. I say more difficult because my community is no longer surrounded by sugar cane, so we have more water, so we can produce more food. Before there was not so much migration because there was production. In the summer we planted watermelon, cucumber, chilli, papaya. There was community work that was paid at Q100 or Q125 a day. But the farmers stopped producing because the sugar cane took all the water, and if there is no water there is no production. So people migrate because they don't have enough to feed their children. They don't even have enough to give them an education, so they are forced to migrate.

There are communities that have no water at all, that have to buy bags of water every day because there are no more wells, they have dried up. And the little water they have is bad, they can't drink it. So that's where there is more migration, because they have to find a way to feed their families. There are houses where only the grandmother and grandfather live, because everyone else has migrated. They all migrated because there is no way to generate income for the family to have food, because even if they plant seeds, the gardens dry up. These families live on remittance money. There are women who go to Retalhuleu to wash clothes, or who go to other departments, that's migration, isn't it? They have to see how they earn to support their families. This migration situation really is hell.

As for the sugar cane, although it generates employment, is not for the people who live here. They bring their

crews from Quiché. Brothers from Quiché who they exploit because they pay them Q40, Q45, Q50 a day, and if they give them food they deduct it. That is why we have called them the sugar mills of death, because there are people who die from the chemicals, fertilizers or who are burnt during harvest time. These are also people who come out of necessity, they come because they only have their little house, but they have no land to work on, they have no way to produce.

The sugar mills come to screw us over, because we have land but no water for production. This is the model that the Guatemalan state is imposing on us. Nobody has consulted us if we want this type of project in our communities. If the state were present here, guaranteeing opportunities, we could stop migration.



Water leaks from the pipeline of the sugar cane companies while nearby communities have no water, Champerico, 3.05.2023.





Sugar cane field in Champerico, 3.05.2023.

### Experiences with temporary visas

Sometimes the government manages to negotiate temporary visas for agricultural workers with the US and Canada. According to Abelino, the experience on the South Coast with these visas has been bad: “A governor at the time sold some 3,500 forms at Q200 each. What did people do? Sell a pig, a chicken, with the intention of getting ahead, but no results were obtained. Nobody was given a visa, nobody benefited. Another case was that of a fishermen’s association that got 20 visas for the United States, but they charged Q10,000 for each person who applied, and in the end the visas were only for six months. This is a problem, they took advantage of people’s need. Those visas should have been free because they were given by the Ministry of Labour. The truth is that corruption is very bad and they take advantage of it. No one has benefited from all these experiences.”

## News from our work

### Resuming accompaniment of FAMDEGUA



FAMDEGUA members at the march for the Dignity of the Victims of the Internal Armed Conflict, Guatemala City, 25.02.2022.

At the beginning of 2023 we began our accompaniment of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA). This accompaniment is not entirely new, as we had already accompanied this organization in the early 1990s. In fact, one of the first organizations we accompanied in Guatemala was the Mutual Support Group (GAM), from which FAMDEGUA was founded in 1992. Its founding members included Aura Elena Farfán (sister of Rubén Amilcar Farfán, a student at the University of San Carlos), Blanca Rosa Hernández (mother of Oscar Hernández, a firefighter) and Marcia Méndez (sister

of Luz Haydée Méndez, a student and mother). They, along with other sisters, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons of disappeared persons, began their tireless search for their loved ones from the early 1980s onwards. Since then, they have provided moral and legal support to a multitude of families and communities that suffered all kinds of human rights violations perpetrated by state forces during the cruelest years of the Internal Armed Conflict (IAC).

Of all the families and communities impacted by the IAC, the survivors of the Dos Erres massacre, a community located in the municipality of La

Libertad, department of Petén, stand out. This massacre was perpetrated on 6, 7 and 8 December 1982 by some 50 Kaibiles (an elite army corps), who dressed up as guerrillas to confuse the population. They assaulted, tortured, raped and killed more than 200 people and threw their bodies in a well. Between 1994 and 1995 FAMDEGUA carried out the first exhumation of the victims' remains. The people involved in this process received multiple death threats. Investigations into the crime dragged on without result, so in September 1996 FAMDEGUA decided to bring the case before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and



before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) in 2008. In November 2009, the Court concluded that the Guatemalan state had failed to comply with its obligations in relation to these “grave human rights violations”, in particular, the failure to conduct a complete and exhaustive investigation into the massacre and those responsible for it. The IACHR also demanded that the State of Guatemala “initiate *ex officio* and without delay a serious, impartial and effective investigation into all the incident of the massacre related to the violation of life, as well as other specific violations of personal integrity, such as the alleged torture and acts of violence against women incorporating a gender perspective.”<sup>1</sup>

After the Court’s judgement, it took two years before, in 2011, Guatemala’s Highest Risk Court A, presided over by Jazmín Barrios, convicted three former Kaibil soldiers and a lieutenant for crimes against humanity and murder. In 2012 and 2018, a former Kaibil sub-instructor and a retired military officer were convicted in subsequent cases. The sentences were set at between 5,000 and 6,000 years’ imprisonment.<sup>2</sup>

This year, 2023, three more former Kaibiles were accused of having participated in the same incidents. However, the High Risk Court E, presided over by Abelina Cruz Toscano alongside Otoniel de León and Alida Mariluz Valenzuela, acquitted the three accused: Gilberto Jordán, José Mardoqueo Ortiz and Alfonso Bulux Vicente. Edgar Pérez, the lawyer representing FAMDEGUA, pointed out that “there are eyewitnesses, there are survivors of the massacre, whose testimonies are not given evidential value due to anti-technical, anti-legal criteria which re-victimize the survivors.” For this reason, they have appealed this sentence and are currently awaiting its resolution.<sup>3</sup>

The Diario Militar case is another important case for members of FAMDEGUA, whose relatives are actual victims. The accusation includes the forced disappearance, extrajudicial execution, arbitrary detention, torture and sexual abuse of at least 195 people, during the military government of Humberto Mejía Víctores (1983-1986).<sup>4</sup> The first statement hearings in this case took place during the first half of 2022 in the High Risk Court A,

presided over by Judge Miguel Angel Gálvez Aguilar. Gálvez indicted nine former military and police officers for crimes against humanity, enforced disappearance and other crimes in May of that year. Six months later, in November 2022, the judge was forced into exile due to death threats and the criminalization process led against him by actors linked to military veterans. In 2023, the interim judges who took over the case changed the coercive measures imposed on the defendants to house arrest, basing their decision on the alleged health problems of the defendants and their advanced age, despite the fact that crimes of this nature do not allow for alternative measures.<sup>5</sup>

During this first year we have accompanied FAMDEGUA on several trips to Petén, where the hearings of the Las Dos Erres case took place, as well as to the hearings in the Diario Militar case, which took place in Guatemala City. We have also visited them regularly at their headquarters.

1 Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, CASO DE LA MASACRE DE LAS DOS ERRES VS. GUATEMALA, 24.11.2009.

2 Medinilla, A., *Cuatro juicios por la matanza de mas de 200 personas*, Agencia Ocote, 04.09.2023.

3 Pérez, R., *Apelan sentencia de Tribunal que dejó libres a tres exkaibiles en caso Dos Erres*, Prensa Comunitaria, 28.11.2023

4 Para más información sobre el caso: *El poder de la palabra. El legado de Luis de León y el caso Diario Militar*, en el Boletín 41 de Brigadas Internacionales de Paz, Proyecto Guatemala.

5 Burt, J.-M. & Estrada, P., *Expediente del Diario Militar es desmantelado por sistemas político-legales corruptos de Guatemala*, WOLA, 4.04.2023

**PBI** is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) which provides international accompaniment and observation at the request of threatened social organizations. The presence of international volunteers backed by a support network helps to deter violence.

## PBI in Guatemala

**PBI** maintained a team of volunteers in Guatemala from 1983 to 1999. During those years, it carried out accompaniment work with human rights organizations, unions, indigenous and campesino organizations, refugees and churches. In 1999, after an evaluation process, it was decided to close the project since the country had greatly advanced in the opening of space for the work of human rights organizations. Nevertheless, **PBI** continued attentive to the happenings in Guatemala through a follow-up committee.

From the middle of 2000, **PBI** began receiving a number of requests for international accompaniment. Due to these requests, PBI carried out an investigation in the field that made evident a turn in the direction and a losing of space for human rights defenders. In April of 2002, **PBI** decided to reopen the Guatemala Project in order to carry out international accompaniment and observation in coordination with other international accompaniment and observation NGOs. In April 2003, the new **PBI** office was opened in Guatemala.

## Purpose and principles

Contribute to improve the human rights situation in Guatemala and accompany social and political processes that promote the enhancement of democracy and participation in the country and the region. To attain this, PBI employs an international presence that supports the maintenance and opening of political and social spaces for human rights defenders, organizations and other social expressions facing repression due to their work supporting human rights.

**PBI** follows the principles of non-violence, non-partisanship and non-interference.



## PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL GUATEMALA PROJECT



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