

**“...IF THOSE OF COCA-COLA
PASS; THEN WE WILL PASS TOO”**

**ORAL STORIES ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND
RESILIENCE OF INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS OF GUATEMALA**

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Guatemalan counterparts from the BUILD Program, Galio Gurdían and Edwin Matamoros from the CCARC Team.



INTRODUCTION

Plagues and pandemics are the assault troops of the Conquest, writes Murdo MacLeod (:40), referring precisely to the plagues, especially smallpox that ravaged and weakened the resistance of the Kaqchiquel people, before the arrival of the band of adventurers Spaniards and their allies Tlaxcalas, under the command of Extremadura sociopath Pedro de Alvarado. MacLeod, relates two factors that have been present in the “long-term” history that characterizes the formation of the State and society of Guatemala and Mesoamerica in general: the wars of conquest and extermination, later converted into State policies to incorporate and civilize the native peoples and the recurrent epidemics or pandemics which have been constitutive part of that long history of extermination, subjection, appropriation of territories and resources that the native peoples and poor, indigenous or ladino peasants of Guatemala and Mesoamerica have experienced.

When the sources and available writings on the subject of plagues and pandemics in Guatemala and Mesoamerica are analyzed, it is evident that these anthropogenic phenomena, in their etiology, morbidity and mortality, are not equitable; they generally impact indigenous, rural and impoverished communities more due to the disparity in financial and human resources between urban centers and remote rural communities; formulation of public policies aimed at defending and consolidating the interests of the dominant groups that control political power; absence of health services and medicines; expropriation of territories and their resources for extractive or conservation interests; markets and productive relations to the detriment of indigenous and rural peasant communities.

"... These wretches/miserables are fools to come to Goathemala to bring the food they need so eagerly, instead of leaving us in any need and we would certainly perish, if daily (the Indians) did not bring us what we need to live"
(Pedro Cortés y Larraz: 286, Volume II, 1958)

Vásquez Monterroso, mentions that the 4 horsemen of the Apocalypse in Guatemala were smallpox, typhus (tabardillo), measles and influenza. "Between 1519 and 1821 there were at least 20 epidemics of smallpox, 18 of typhus, 9 of measles and 4 of influenza, which add up to 51 of the 59 epidemics registered by Luján" (Vásquez Monterroso: 5, 2020)

W. George Lovell, referring to the Tabardillo / Typhus plague that struck the Altiplano communities from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, quotes a letter dated May 5, 1806, from the Bailiff of Soloma Parish, Marcos Castañeda, to the District Governor, Colonel Prudencio Cozar:

"That the Peoples of Soloma have been in the greatest distress for four years now, due to the death of Yndios that caused the plague of Tabardios dying without consolation, and any remedy, and that they would be left alone in their grief. We the Ladino residents Marcos and Santiago Castañeda, also afraid of death, we hulled with our families to the solitude of the mountains, and rocks of the Chemal place, suffering from the extreme of his temperament, leaving our hunts and assets abandoned in Soloma. To appease this terrible scourge, we once again recognized our neighborhood; and we found that most of the natives of the town of Santa Eulalia had been absent, their Indians dying in different places, leaving many bodies without burying themselves, and that for this reason the animals ate them of the field, and that with the corruption of these corpses, and the countless sheep that perished in the Corrales, the epidemic increased "(Lovell: 280, 1998).

W. George Lovell and Christopher Lutz refer to 8 pandemics in the post-colonial and independent history of Guatemala. In all of them, poor ladino indigenous and peasant communities are represented as passive and impoverished subjects, without greater capacity and initiative to face the pandemics and socio-economic and political crises that afflict them. The indigenous communities appear in the writings and reports from the structures of power, as guilty of their ailments and sufferings, due to their passivity, apathy, ignorance, unhealthiness and for resorting to cultural resources typical of indigenous backwardness, such as the Temazcal. The narrative from the dominant groups, including the Catholic Church, reiterates and justifies the need to continue the control and domination of the indigenous and poor peasants (Lovell: 278, 2013).

Richard N. Adams, in his extraordinary analysis of the 1918-1919 influenza (Spanish Flu) epidemic in Guatemala, points out that there was no bureaucratic infrastructure prepared to deal with such a tragedy. After analyzing its impact throughout the country, but especially in the indigenous communities of the Altiplano, he wonders if the lack of governmental response was due to the "unusual levels of corruption" and incapacity or simply to the underdevelopment (of the country). His conclusion is that not only the central government, but the press and the Guatemalan elite in general, were completely unprepared to face the severe impact of such an epidemic " (Adams: 482; 548, 1997). One hundred and two years after the Spanish influenza epidemic, the world, Mesoamerica and Guatemala, have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic again with very little preparation to face it.

The leaders of COMUNDICH, Mesa de Tierras Comunes, Utz' Che', COPAE and ACOFOP / AMPB partners / counterparts of the BUILD program made a rich reflection on seven months of response from their organizations and communities to COVID-19 and the socio-economic crisis and accompanying policy. What is interesting about the abundant material presented here is that this recurring colonial representation of "miserable" subjects, ignorant, backward, abulent, dependent, drunk, subjected to the colonial authorities or the State apparatus, disappears. They reemerge, full of initiative and strength, individual and community actors that, despite 500 years of extermination, denial and exclusion, successfully face the COVID-19 Pandemic and the public policies of the racist, exclusive and oppressive Guatemalan state, precisely by resorting to the accumulated knowledge of the elderly, their sustainable management of water and forests, the use of family gardens, traditional medicine, such as Temazcal and the use of herbs, as well as the control of their local markets and access roads. Surely this "agency" of the peoples and communities is not something new. As Vásquez Monterroso writes, this "ability of the Mayan populations to decide for themselves on how to face epidemics, military and political defeats, the European invasion and the transformation of their world" is the result of a long accumulated experience (Vásquez Monterroso: 12, 2020).

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The material presented here, is the result of seven bilateral and collective virtual meetings of five indigenous and community organizations held in October and November 2020 with the Caribbean and Central America Resource Center (CCARC) team. From these talks, their respective responses, lessons learned and proposals to face the COVID- 19, and the related ecological, socio-economic, cultural and political crisis are collected. In this sense, the document is a novel and refreshing narrative that fractures and upsets the negative centennial representation of indigenous communities and impoverished peasants. The text presented here is part of that tradition of resilience and refers to experiences, lessons learned and good practices that organizations have managed to consolidate in seven months, from March 15, when the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Guatemala, until October 2020. During that period, the five participating organizations made urgent decisions of local and regional governance, with national repercussions, related to food security and logistics on their communities and resources to protect communities from the contagion of COVID-19 , protect its elders men and women bearers of memories and wisdoms, rescue the practices of traditional medicine combining it with the "chemical" medicine of the state, continue their struggles for the lands and territories using the legal resources recognized by the state, train their new leadership and creatively appropriate information and communication technologies (ICT) .

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The leaders of indigenous and community organizations refer to good practices and achievements, but also to the great pending challenges. Those great challenges are the equal participation of women and youth in management structures, recovering food security and local markets, promoting emerging leaderships respecting the experience and knowledge of current leadership, consolidating the organizational and institutional strengthening of indigenous organizations and communities, including the physical safety of the leaders, due to the permanent violence they experience in the struggle for their historic rights. The response of indigenous and community organizations to the COVID-19 Pandemic; and the concomitant socio-economic and political crisis thus signifies a transcendental turning point in the history of Guatemalan society.

MAIN ASPECTS ADDRESSED AND RESPONSES OF INDIGENOUS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND TO THE OPPORTUNISTIC POLICIES OF THE NATION STATE.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been used by the government and groups in power in Guatemala to accentuate the exclusionary, racist and repressive nature of the Guatemalan state. There has been an abuse of the legal figure of "states of siege" to repress popular mobilization, especially in indigenous communities and territories. In this sense, there is a use of the legal system as an instrument of control and repression of indigenous and peasant communities. The judicial initiatives and reforms during the crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic have aimed to penalize and weaken non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society, especially indigenous and community organizations.

The establishment of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in 2006 had generated much hope to eradicate corruption in the structure of the state. However, its dissolution on September 3, 2019, by a unilateral decision of the government of Jimmy Morales, led the factual powers that govern Guatemala: big capital, the military and drug traffickers to restore the repressive, corrupt, racist and exclusionary state apparatus. The expulsion of the CICIG and the restoration of control of the state apparatus by these power structures has meant passing from the rule of law to the Pact of Corrupt.

This prevalence of the said pact and its appropriation of the state apparatus, generates violence, purchase and political control of indigenous and community leaderships, against indigenous and community interests. The violence is especially strong against the indigenous and community leadership that defends the claims for the recovery of land, territories and natural resources such as water and forests.

State policies during the pandemic have been aimed at benefiting megaprojects against community interests. Such is the case of the "El Mirador" project in El Petén against forest concessions and mining and hydroelectric projects in indigenous communities. Power groups and the state seek to expropriate and control indigenous and community territories and their resources (water, forests, soil and subsoil). All this increases the threats and physical insecurity of the indigenous and community leadership.

However, there is a growing indigenous and community resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and state policies. Indigenous communities see their resources looted, due to state and government policies. In response to the crisis and pandemic, the organization and internal community work have been reinforced through local protection actions, isolation of communities, rescuing traditional health, food security, community economy and markets including revalidation of bartering.

Civil Society Organizations, including indigenous and community organizations, are considered and treated as threats to the security of the state and government, presenting great similarity to the rest of Nation States in Central America. In the face of threats, there is a better organizational capacity. Here is a list of the main aspects addressed during the Pandemic:

- ◇ Rescue of the community economy and promotion of food security through the promotion of gardens, production of basic grains, establishment of seed banks. Communities and their leaders also emphasized product bartering and control of communal markets to control speculators and hoarders.
- ◇ Training of emerging leaderships and strengthening of work with women and young people of both sexes.
- ◇ The pandemic has had positive effects on the organizational and institutional strengthening of organizations, making them more resilient.
- ◇ The initial response to the pandemic and crisis was to attend to survival emergencies, especially food and health. In this attention, inter-organizational articulation and solidarity the formation of networks played a key role. The organizations link the issue of sustainability with the strengthening of organizations with their own resources, intercommunal solidarity and international cooperation, especially the BUILD program. The main strength of indigenous and community organizations is the support of the community structure and its bases.
- ◇ Despite historical and ideological differences, there is an incipient process of forming networks and alliances between indigenous and peasant organizations for common interests linked to territory and resources.
- ◇ During the pandemic, institutional violence has increased from power groups and the state, against indigenous and community leadership in general. This has forced an increase in physical security measures for indigenous and community leaders.
- ◇ Protection of community memory and wisdom. Fundamental importance of traditional structures and older people to maintain community cohesion and rescue the knowledge and practices of traditional medicine, including the use of Temazcal, and recovery of the methods of production and social reproduction. They consider that one of the great achievements has been to be able to combine the practices of traditional medicine and the "chemical" medicine of the State. The protection of the knowledge of the elderly is also linked to the recovery of knowledge to face the Climate Crisis from one's own ethnic identity.
- ◇ Measures and messages from the central government and their effects on the communities have generated social and economic wear and tear due to the confinement measures.

- ◇ Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) combined with the use of traditional communication networks to maintain internal communication and strengthen community networks. There is a growing recognition of the importance of ICT in organizational and institutional strengthening, community relations and community demands, especially the struggle for land. The role of young people, men and women in the management of ICTs, has been fundamental and a great contribution in the crisis of the pandemic.
- ◇ There is criticism of specific and short-term development projects, which usually reflect more the short-term interests and needs of donors than the medium and long-term needs of the population. Additionally, short-term projects generally do not cover administrative costs or guarantee institutional sustainability. However, they recognize that there are institutional weaknesses in formulating projects and managing resources. They do not dedicate enough resources and time to publicize their work. The increasing decrease in cooperation resources and greater competition for resources make it increasingly difficult to manage resources and maintain institutional functioning.
- ◇ Emerging leaderships of youth and women. There is a growing participation of women and young people in instances of communication and management and efforts for the formation of emerging leaderships of young people of both sexes and women. They recognize, however, the obstacles and resistance due to a macho tradition to successfully work on the gender issue.
- ◇ Organizational and Institutional Strengthening. They highlight the fundamental role of the Ford Foundation and its BUILD program to support long-term processes flexibly and sustainably. Maintain support for organizational and institutional strengthening. The challenge of financial sustainability; a permanent challenge / aspiration. They suggest the need to establish a two-way communication between aid workers and organizations to publicize the work carried out. Again, in this context, the contradictions between the demands and logic of specific projects and the strategic needs of organizational and institutional strengthening are raised.
- ◇ Struggles for basic and territorial rights of the communities based on the current legal system. What is new here is that indigenous organizations have been successful in their claims using resources and legal figures established by the State, such as the right to private property, to defend their territorial rights.
- ◇ To the extent that they argue the private ownership of communal territories, they have succeeded in getting the Constitutional Court to recognize their territorial rights, neutralizing the open opposition of the groups of the great capital. However, the return of the corrupt pact to the control of the State has had an impact on the closure of legal spaces and on community struggles related to the recovery of territories and resources.
- ◇ Indigenous identity, associated rights and relations with peasant community organizations. They recognize the diversity of interests and ideological approaches, as well as the difficulties in establishing common alliances and strategies between the peasant sector and indigenous communities. However, they realize that it is possible to overcome ideological differences and have a gradual convergence of visions and interests.
- ◇ Governance, human rights and environmental crisis. The pandemic has shown the close link between the destruction of Nature and its resources with the increase in zoonotic diseases. In this sense, they are very clear that the governance and effective control of their territories and resources to guarantee food security, environmental health and sustainability of their communities, are the best contribution to reduce the vulnerability of Guatemala and prevent future epidemics and / or pandemics.

Thus, based on the abundant material located in the historical documents and the proactive participation of the leaders in the seven talks, conclusive aspects can be pointed out that contribute to understanding the institutional and organizational strengthening of the actors in question.

There is an incipient awareness that the COVID-19 pandemic and the climatic, socio-economic and political crisis that accompany it, have exposed the recurrent repressive, exclusionary and racist structures that constitute the basic fabric of Guatemalan society and the Nation State. The harmful inheritance of the power and caste structure of the Captaincy General of the Kingdom of Guatemala continues in many ways in force. These centuries-old structures continue to haunt the indigenous peoples and impoverished communities of Guatemalan society.

Despite the criticism, adaptation and resilience from indigenous and community organizations to this socio-economic and political structure, the transcribed narrative does not clearly propose an alternative vision towards a new social pact, which eradicates that long-lasting heritage of history. Guatemalan. The discourse does not yet include a criticism and structural proposal to overcome the profound environmental, socio-economic, cultural and political vulnerability that constitutes the fertile field for new epidemics and pandemics. In some way, the Covid-19 epidemic and its immediate crisis constitute a kind of anomaly and accident in recent history and are not a constitutive part of the congenital vulnerability of Guatemalan and Mesoamerican societies, including their state apparatuses.

The challenge is to assume with all its risks and complexity, the great step that indigenous and community organizations have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic and its crisis, to take control of their local spaces, consolidate their leadership, 10

networks and alliances, to build a plurinational society and state that represent and respond to the multiethnic and multilingual nature of Guatemalan and Mesoamerican society.

In a July 2020 article in New York magazine titled: How plagues have transformed the World, its author argues that: "... Pandemics and plagues... always present survivors with a choice. The post-pandemic fight Will it be to try to return to the previous status quo, or will there be the capacity to reinvent ourselves and build an alternative future? We can choose (between) making a different world, rearranging our social contract, our political institutions and our relationship with nature in such a way that it protects us or at least helps us mitigate the damage of future plagues or pandemics or we can simply rescue what it existed of valuable before the pandemic and that it confiscated the plague, to restore the previous status quo "(Sullivan, 2020).

In the Guatemalan and Mesoamerican case, the resilience of indigenous and community organizations, will they lead to recognition of their contributions to mitigate the climate crisis that plagues us, a contributing factor to plagues and pandemics, as well as to fight for the rule of law that they lead to? to a new equitable and inclusive social contract that reflects the plurinational, multicultural and multilingual nature of the region?

The Sololá Memorial and the narratives of the interviewees suggest that the State of Guatemala and the power groups understand the exclusive, racist and authoritarian practices of the Conquest and the Colony, as strategic tasks still unfinished for their project of an exclusive and mono-ethnic nation. In general, the state apparatus and power groups continue to insist on their historic project of ladinizing and expropriating indigenous communities. This "civilizing" and assimilating project involves expropriating the territories and their resources, however, resilient communities continue to oppose indigenous cultures and territorial claims.

Five centuries away, the strategy to overcome the “obstacle” is practically the same: Eliminate or at least take advantage of the weaknesses of the indigenous communities and poor peasants, to advance the exclusive and racist interests of the groups and castes in power.

The lessons and good practices of Guatemalan indigenous and community organizations present an excellent opportunity to imagine and build an alternative, inclusive and plurinational scenario, in which society and the State recognize the extraordinary contributions that indigenous peoples and peasant communities make to reduce the vulnerability of Guatemalan society by protecting its lands, territories and resources such as water, forests, air and subsoil.

The recent FAO and FILAC publication entitled: Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and Forest Governance (2021), coincides with these approaches by indigenous and community organizations in Guatemala. There is a strong correspondence between the lessons learned in Guatemala during the COVID-19 pandemic and its feasibility with the five core components proposed by the FAO study. Five aspects that should be seen as an interdependent set that should contribute to profound transformations. Those components are:



I. Collective territorial rights.



II. Compensation for environmental services.



III. . Community forest management.



IV. Cultural revitalization and traditional knowledge.



V. Territorial governance and indigenous and Afro-descendant organization.

There are therefore national and regional proactive alternatives, which indicate the route to follow and through which societies and States as a whole win. We must continue to fight for that and the lessons and good practices presented here hope to contribute to that work.

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