



Consultation on Global Development, Environmental Protection, and Religion

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and the Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University convened a consultation, December 7, 2015 in Washington, DC. Part of a broader project supported by the Henry R. Luce Foundation, the aim was to elicit ideas about ways faith-based actors approach the significant environmental challenges facing Guatemala and their actual and potential engagement.¹ The dynamic and active nature of religious institutions and practice in Guatemala, along with a large presence of faith-inspired organizations, makes religion a salient topic for all development issues in the country. Pope Francis' focus on environmental concerns in the May 2015 *Laudato Si'* encyclical has sparked active conversation on the environment globally, challenging religious communities to cooperate more effectively on environmental and climate change issues in Guatemala. Attending the event were eight scholars and development practitioners based in the Washington, DC metro area with experience in topics at the intersection of religion and development in Guatemala and WFDD and Berkley Center staff. Their diverse perspectives and expertise allowed a broad exploration of the many environmental issues facing contemporary Guatemala, including climate change financing, the extractive industry, and natural resource sustainability. The conversation focused on religious dimensions of development within the context of those challenges. The discussion built on prior desk research and the fieldwork in Guatemala in October 2015. This note provides a short summary of this discussion.

RELIGIOUS ADVOCACY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The Catholic Church has been a vocal religious voice for environmental protection and land rights in Guatemala. Protecting God's creation is rooted in scripture (notably Matthew 25, the Beatitudes, and the Good Samaritan parable). A number of Church organizations, such as the Social and Rural Pastoral Associations within many Guatemalan dioceses, advocate actively for increased protection of the environment.

Evangelical churches, an increasing presence in Guatemala with an estimated 40 percent of the population,² have yet to respond to environmental protection issues with a unified message. Consultation participants attributed this to the lack of hierarchy within Evangelical churches (in sharp contrast to the Catholic Church), as well as possible tensions arising from ways in which Evangelicals interpret the gospel; these are often unique to each individual denomination. Some Evangelicals are community-oriented and view their role as stewards of God's creation, while others

¹ More information at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-guatemala>

² Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region" (Pew Research Center, November 13, 2014).

are more focused on personal salvation and follow the “prosperity gospel”, which links faith with material wealth, including wealth extracted through agricultural use of the land. Notwithstanding differences, most Evangelicals share a focus on the life hereafter, a notion that could be used as an entry point to mobilize the community to protect the environment to ensure the well being of children in preparation for the afterlife.

Indigenous approaches to land, water, and other aspects of development are especially significant in Guatemala where people of Maya descent comprise around 40 percent of Guatemala’s population. While many Maya consider themselves Christian, Maya cosmology, which views all elements of nature as connected and living, is widely regarded and motivates many Maya to speak out against harmful environmental practices. Likewise, Maya priests, rather than secular community leaders, are considered to be the traditional and cultural authorities in heavily indigenous regions of the country. Participants highlighted the need to consider the historical and religious ties of the Maya to the land, especially when planning new projects that require prior consultation with communities.

The well-known issue of coordination was highlighted as an issue and impediment. There is a history of the secular world looking to religious actors to support development in Guatemala; NGO’s and international development institutions have worked with religious groups in various development projects. However, there is no central coordinating body for Protestant churches and organizations in Guatemala that serves as an interlocutor with development institutions.

EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES

Tensions around extractive industries are a major issue in Guatemala and various faith-linked actors are actively involved. Guatemala is rich in minerals; gold, silver, nickel, and tin are among the main minerals currently extracted almost entirely by foreign companies. Foreign-owned mining companies receive significant support, including tax breaks, from the Guatemalan government. Mining activists have incited social unrest at the sites of the mines, many of which are located in regions of Guatemala where indigenous populations are focused. Some issues involve land rights and other specific issues such as water quality. More broadly various Guatemalan groups, both secular and religious, question policies on natural resources. Catholic bishops have been actively involved in contesting both new mining projects and the management of specific projects. Working through Social and Rural Pastoral Associations, the Catholic Church has supported Maya activists to protest new and ongoing mining projects and at one point formed the Defensive Front of San Miguel (Fredemi) with an Evangelical group to oppose the Marlin mine in San Marcos. Fredemi took their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and succeeded (briefly) in their campaign to stop the mine.

Consultation participants noted that historically it has been harder to extend engagement on mining issues to include other, non-Catholic religious sectors. Similarly, they noted that once a mine is in operation, clear definition of issues and dialogue can be problematic. This suggests that early engagement (at the planning stage) is especially important. Participants echoed a sentiment highlighted by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*: that mining companies operate with impunity and leave behind an ecological debt to the communities where they operate. In Guatemala, many companies are obeying the law as it is written but are manipulating the system to avoid paying taxes that could fund development activities.

INDIGENOUS OWNERSHIP OF LAND

A host of land tenure and land use issues affect Guatemalan communities and especially the Maya people, still mostly living in rural areas. Religious actors are increasingly involved as advocates for change. Access to land is central to the livelihoods of the communities. The expansion of large-scale plantations that tend to concentrate land for use in single-crop farming for export, have left many Maya communities with small, over-exploited plots for subsistence agriculture.

Both land policy and practices in Guatemala have taken little account of the rights of poor communities. In October 2015, the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) heard a case brought by the Catholic Church, Maya lawyers, and non-religious actors against the palm oil industry in Guatemala, evaluating whether the human rights of the indigenous peoples were being violated. This case echoed past experience, in which indigenous communities asserted that they were not consulted prior to breaking ground on development projects as required by Guatemalan law and international standards. Development agencies have sought to conduct these community consultations in Maya communities, but have noted that they do not always know with whom to meet and that these consultations can take a lot of time to get community support. A “mapping tool” to guide consultations with indigenous communities is missing. Some advocacy groups are working to protect the rights of indigenous communities. For example, the Center for International Environmental Law developed a tool to provide information to communities before development projects begin. Similarly, the Landmark project is working to brand community-owned land around the world. Participants also noted issues with subsoil rights. The Guatemalan constitution grants to communities the right to surface-level land, but the state retains the ownership of resources below the ground, which are then contracted to mining companies.

Participants explored issues around debates about small-scale vs. large-scale agriculture; various faith-inspired groups highlight the benefits of small-scale agriculture both as an approach to environmental sustainability and the rights of smallholders.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POLICIES

Various initiatives to strengthen environmental protection in Guatemala are underway. Funding sources, include the Green Climate Fund, the Climate Investment Funds, and targeted funding by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), which recently announced plans to double investment in climate finance by 2020. In Guatemala, the IADB is starting to work with the government on a strategy to distribute clean cook stoves and is supporting the Forest Investment program with the World Bank to support reforestation and conservation of forests.

Among Catholics, a Maryknoll association is analyzing how the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has had negative environmental impacts. Both development and religious groups are concerned about new and existing international trade policies and their potential negative environmental consequences. In particular, these groups are worried about the incentives included for the extractive industry.