

COPAN: COLLABORATION FOR IDENTITY, EQUITY AND SUSTAINABILITY (HONDURAS)

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INTRODUCTION

Copan: Site, Agriculture and Population

Honduras, a country with an area of 112,420 sq km and a population of close to five million inhabitants is located in the heart of Central America. Conquered by the Spaniards in the early 1500s, only around 7 percent of the population is indigenous, due to various causes including wars, diseases and intermarriage with descendants of the Spanish immigrants.

The city of Copan Ruinas, in the west of Honduras, is a major tourist center due to the important pre-colombian ruins located there. These were constructed by the Mayan civilization, a temple-building culture stretching from southern Mexico through Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. About 150,000 tourists visit Copan every year and, as a result, the tourist industry is of major economic importance to the local population. Other important economic activities in Copan include agriculture (mainly tobacco and coffee for export) and extensive cattle raising. These activities are dominated by farmers descended from the Spaniards who came to Copan at a time when the Mayan civilisation was already in a period of decline.

In addition to the farmers of Spanish descent, the communities surrounding Copan are populated by agricultural laborers described as 'farmers with indigenous tradition', in this particular case 'Chorti tradition'. According to Rivas, these Chortis are descendents of the Mayans. Their subsistence agriculture, which is carried out in very small plots, is mainly to produce maize and beans for family consumption. These communities are severely disadvantaged: illiteracy rates in many communities are between 92 and 100 percent, infant mortality rates are of the order of 60 percent, average life expectancy is 49 years for men and 55 years for women, malnutrition rates are high and houses with areas of 30-40 sq m are typically inhabited by 10 people or more.

ORIGINS OF THE SITUATION

For around the last 7 years, a conflict has existed in the Copan area which has both international and national implications. This conflict is largely concerned with land tenure issues (a notoriously sensitive area in Latin America).

According to Larrea et al., the land tenure situation in Copan has passed through three main stages. Originally, the Chortis were owners of individual plots or used communal land. Subsequently, after the Spanish conquest, the land and the people became Spanish property. The Chortis used the land in the *aparcería* system (whereby farmers rent land from landowners in return for payment of a proportion of the harvest obtained), since their own land was not sufficient for their needs. During the third stage, farmers lost their land due to mercantile development (export crop production); in this period the *aparcería* system still prevailed.

The land tenure situation has stayed largely stable for more than 500 years, but started to experience some changes in 1991 as a result of the signing by the Honduran government of Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which aims to protect and benefit indigenous communities to and improve their access to land, health, housing and other basic needs. After the ratification of Convention 169, communities around Copan city began a process of organization as indigenous communities, and asked the Honduran government for land. Several marches, demonstrations and hunger strikes occurred in pursuit of their cause.

A key event was the (as yet unsolved) murder, in April 1997, of the Chorti leader Candido Amador. This put pressure on the government to solve and respond to Chorti claims. This was just the tip of the iceberg in the situation between the chortis and the landowners, however. The landowners, through their Farmers and Ranchers Organization of Copan Ruinas (AGACOR), also argued their case for land rights to the Government.

In May 1997 the government signed an agreement with the national Chorti organization (CONICHH) offering 2,000 ha of land in Copan. After a long wait, 5 of the 17 chorti communities received 390 ha. CONICHH (which at that time was two years old) had to take a lead role in coordinating the sharing out of the land, dealing with the proposals for assistance from different development organizations, and resisting pressures from landowners.

ADDRESSING THE SPECIFICS

Due to the complexity of the land tenure issues involved, it is necessary to break the situation down into sub-issues. The main conflict about land tenure provoked a limited response from the Government, which in December 1997 gave the Chortis around 350 ha of land in the communities of La Laguna, La Estanzuela, El Chilar, Boca del Monte and Monte de los Negros. At that time, CONICHH asked several NGOs for support.

CARITAS de Honduras became involved at a time when CONICHH was new and weak; local and international pressures were very strong; violence was still a possibility between land owners and Chorti communities; a change of Government was in the offing and the accomplishment of agreements was still weak. CONICHH asked CARITAS to collaborate in the decision-making processes regarding the management of the land newly allocated by the Government. CARITAS, as a member of COLABORA, initiated a process that aimed to provide CONICHH with technical and organizational recommendations about land use management. In support of this process, several stages were planned:

1. The first stage was to conduct a workshop to understand the situation better. Given the history of violence in the conflict, it was necessary to assess each actor individually and understand their position. The network started to work with the Chortis since they were more vulnerable and requested help;
2. The second stage involved the participation of researchers, to help understand community needs better; and,
3. The third stage will involve analyzing the information gathered in the communities, providing technical assistance and developing community plans. This stage is particularly important since CONICHH cannot be considered to represent fully the indigenous population until the communities have themselves said what they really want.

THE ACTORS

Understanding the different actors' perspectives, positions and interests is an important first step to providing a better understanding of the situation, and ideas as to how it might be handled. The actors and their interrelationships are shown in Diagram 1. There are about twenty different actors in the conflict; however, the most relevant are (see Table 1):

- *Farmers with chorti tradition.* Independent laborers (both landed and landless);
- *Land owners.* Primarily six families owning land in and around Copan city;
- *Government.* Local (municipality) and national (Executive Power and Institute for Agrarian Reform); and,
- *Non-governmental organizations.* international organizations providing technical assistance.

Table 1. Positions and Interests of Main Actors on the Copan Land Tenure Conflict (from the perspective of CONICHH, 30 January 1998)

Actor	Positions Expressed	Reasons
Landowners who do not sell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will not sell land to the Government which will be used by the Chortis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect themselves from the Chorti communities • To protect their children (security, money)
Landowners who did sell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sell land to the Government for use by the Chortis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To obtain the good price which the Government is offering for the lands • To protect their families
Organized Chorti communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To obtain land for production • Wish for a Chorti territory (flora, fauna, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect resources for their own use and that of others, and secure the future • Improve living conditions for their families • Nature has a cultural and religious value for the Chortis
Non-organized Chorti communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will not organize with the Chortis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security, to remain with the land or have access to a better life
Municipality (local government)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To apply municipality law of land tenure which established part of the land Chortis received by INA belongs to the municipality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More money, fulfil promises • Fear of landowners, communism, the 'antichrist' brought about by the landowners
National Agrarian Institute (INA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow instructions from the main government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ?
Previous President (Carlos Roberto Reina)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy some land for the Chortis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfill International Agreement • Prevent International Pressures • Give a good image to the government • Stop mass media attention to the case

An issue that makes the situation more complex is that even within each group of actors different situations and positions exist.

Some landowners sold their land to the government, getting favorable prices for it. Other land owners, however, did not sell, since there was not enough funding for purchase and changes in the government

paralyzed the selling-buying process. Both those who sold and those who did not are represented by their organization AGACOR. The landowners typically depend on having Chorti communities close to their land as a source of labor. However they strongly question the position of the Chortis (and even the use of the term Chorti), arguing that they are neither truly indigenous descendants of the Mayans, nor even Honduran. Their arguments are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Perceptions of One Land Owner Family About Chortis and Land Access Rights

Topic	Perception
Indigenous background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not know the Chorti language • They do not wear indigenous clothes as Guatemalan Chortis do • The Chortis are genetically the same as others in the community who do not call themselves Chortis • They dress well • They are not poor
Chorti poverty	They are not poor because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They drink beer • They buy expensive clothes • There is poverty all over the world and the Chortis are well off compared to the poor in the cities
Chorti organization authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are not Hondurans • They are not indigenous • They are receiving international support (outsiders are bad influence for them) • They are enriching themselves
Land access rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are Guatemalans • They were brought to Honduras as labor by the landowners • They got Honduran papers illegally • They are not poor • They are damaging the land and the private property • They do not take good care of the environment “One who wants to have something in life has to work hard for it”

The Chortis can also be classified in two categories: laborers who belong to CONICHH and those who do not. As can be see in Table 1, it is fear of the landowners and of losing their jobs that prevents non-organized farmers from joining CONICHH, since the consequences of becoming a member in the organization has implied:

- Losing their jobs with land owners;
- Losing access to land in order to produce food;
- For some laborers, going to jail for building new houses on landowners’ territory; and,
- Receiving death threats.

National Government plays a decisive role in the conflict. Agreement 169 was the starting point that encouraged the indigenous people to demand their rights. This agreement was signed under the presidency of Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1997). The Executive Power of the Government also negotiated with CONICHH and signed agreements to provide 2,000 hectares of land to the Chorti communities. Newly elected president Carlos Roberto Flores took power in February 1998. He has convened two meetings with all indigenous organizations, but to date there are no formal resolutions to

fulfil the commitments the previous president made to CONICHH. A big challenge for the Government will be to prevent violence. Both parties admit to having weapons and both have threatened each other in violent terms if the conflict does not get solved. However, both parties acknowledge how eager they are for peace and stability for their respective families.

For the tourism industry, that provides important amounts of cash to the local economy, a peaceful environment is required to attract tourists.

The Catholic church, both local and national, is concerned, but do not want to be involved in the conflict. Only Jesuit priests and CARITAS have some presence and provide some support.

The mass media tended to forget about the conflict after CONICHH signed agreements with the previous government.

Public Universities, UPEC and UNAH, are carrying out training and research with the Chorti communities.

External (international) support groups have been active in providing economic and moral support to the Chortis, thereby helping to strengthen the position of this disadvantaged group. This has led to accusations, both from the landowners and from the Government, that the case of the Chortis is being manipulated by external actors in pursuit of their own agendas; however the risk of the creation of this impression is balanced by the advantages of their positive achievements.

MANAGEMENT OF 'NEW LAND', A POTENTIAL CONFLICT

As a result of negotiations between CONICHH and COLABORA, it was decided to collaborate with communities who had recently acquired land from the government. The communities were eager to start cropping and distributing the land received. They felt autonomous about decision-making regarding the use of the land, but CONICHH did not agree with this perception.

The land received by the communities (although the legal conditions associated with this donation are not yet clear) can be classified into four categories: pine forest, broad leaved forest, eroded step hills with little pasture, and coffee plantations.

Before the research was started, the communities had ideas about how to manage the land and the use they wanted to make of it. They said they wanted to protect pine forests, to protect sources of water; to plant more coffee on the broad leaved forest; to use eroded steep hills for agriculture (maize and beans), and to maintain the existing coffee plantations. CONICHH argued strongly for the protection of the pine forests; however, after a few weeks the communities started to cut and sell fuelwood from them.

Disagreement between CONICHH and some communities grew and threatened the stability and strength of the organization. Division was the biggest threat of all, even bigger than landowners' threats or doubts over the Government's fulfillment of agreements. Initially, CONICHH operated on the following assumptions:

- That the amount of land allocated did not correspond with that promised by the Government;
- That land quality was good, and communities could decide what they wanted to crop;
- That land was sufficient for actual community members and also for people in other communities who did not receive any land;
- That the land was to be worked by the people in communities both collectively and individually (the

traditional pattern in Chorti culture);

- That CARITAS would be able to fulfil funding and technical assistance required; and,
- That by receiving the land, many of the problems would be solved.

By working with researchers from COLABORA, conducting participatory rural appraisal activities with five communities that had acquired land, and by measuring the amount of land allocated, we were able to clarify the following of these assumptions and concerns of CONICHH:

- The land given by the government was actually more than expected (415.8 ha instead of 350 ha);
- The land was, generally speaking, very degraded and eroded, slopes were up to 35 percent and there were very few possibilities for irrigation;
- The area was insufficient for the population of even the five communities awarded land, let alone people from other communities;
- People did not want to work the land collectively, but instead wanted all the land to be distributed individually;
- CARITAS was unable to fulfil all community needs, as a result of which CONICHH began to negotiate with other NGOs and the Government; and,
- More problems emerged by receiving the land, and pressures from land owners remained significant since the new government is not following up previous agreements.

As it can be seen, many of the initial concerns and assumptions made by CONICHH were not correct; gathering correct information has been a useful tool. This gathering of correct information has been possible by collaboration among CONICHH, CARITAS and COLABORA. Actions and decisions have been made by CONICHH and the communities. Follow-up decisions made by the communities and CONICHH have been complex. After the Chorti communities obtained land, many institutions (local, national, international, private and public) have offered their services and collaboration. For CONICHH, the questions associated with such offers are:

- With whom and under which criteria will CONICHH collaborate with other institutions?;
- How will land be divided and assigned to the people in the communities?;
- What will happen to people that do not belong to CONICHH?;
- How will forest and water be protected and used?; and,
- How will land be cultivated and which crops will be planted?

After several meetings between CARITAS and CONICHH, and with the assistance of an agricultural technician, the following decisions were taken:

Criteria for Collaboration with Other Organizations

- Organizations should contact CONICHH and discuss with them their plans and objectives for collaboration;
- Organizations should go to the communities, discuss with them what are the communities' needs and prepare plans with them;
- Organizations should present plans to CONICHH for their approval;
- Organizations should provide periodic reports about results and problems in the work; and,
- If there is more than one organization working with the same component, CONICHH and the communities will decide with which they will work.

Criteria for Assigning Land to People

- Plots will be divided according to their fertility; a basic division will be made by mathematically dividing the number of hectares of agriculture land between the number of families in the community; but in areas where the land is more eroded, steep or rocky, plots will be bigger;
- Forests will be divided into three categories: watershed areas, reserve areas and production areas;
- Management plans should be produced for each area and communities will be responsible for the implementation of the plans, with the supervision of CONICHH; and,
- Coffee plantations will be extended into the broad leaved forest, but there will be a reserve area in this type of forest as well.

Community Activities on Land for Cultivation

- Land for cultivation will be cleared, leaving some trees with particular potential (such as for fruit and timber);
- Land is not to be burnt (except when unavoidable due to the presence of thorny plants);
- Soil conservation practices are to be used;
- Organic matter is to be used to improve soil fertility;
- Crop diversification, instead of monocultures, is to be aimed for;
- Decisions about particular types of crops have to be made by communities;
- Collective systems of working are not to be imposed;
- Crops that require collective effort are to be tried, to permit communities to experiment with them and strengthen their organization; and,
- Loans may be provided in kind but not in money.

There are other decisions that still need to be taken by the communities and CONICHH about the management of the land, but it is more important to start to implement the ones that have been made already. A follow-up strategy to monitor such implementation will be decisive in the success of all the decisions made.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been important to break down the conflict into small issues. The solving of small issues has provided some optimism for the resolution of the conflict as a whole. To make decisions about which issue to start with, it is important to assess first the immediate needs of the actors and let them decide what to do first.

Strengthening the capacity of the local people, normally the actors that are weakest (in terms of their economic situation and lack of respect of their rights) has been an important aspect of this work. It is important, however, to recognize that we have to understand the perspectives of all of the actors involved and to work individually with each of them to be able to 'negotiate' on a more informed basis in the future. Not assessing the other actors can bias the process and cause further conflicts.

It is important to consider local capacity for conflict solving. Locals need to be in charge of the whole process because they often have answers to their own problems. Outsiders have a specific, but not protagonistic, role to play in conflict management and specific external advice can be valuable, providing it is requested.

The conflict in Copan, which had simmered for many years, came to a head as a result of the ratification of ILO Convention 169 by the Government. If the conflict had not come to a head, the locals would probably never have developed the skills to handle it. However legal instruments (such as Convention

169) alone cannot transform conflict situations such as this one; political will and local abilities and willingness are also required. In Copan, it did not take long for the Chortis to obtain land, but it would be naïve to think that this ended the problem; on the contrary, important conflicts emerged more strongly after the Chortis received land.

Possibilities of violence still exist, but calling for international attention has provided more power and respect to locals. Violence could also conceivably occur if the Government does not intervene and legalize land that has already been assigned to the Chortis.

External material and moral support can be of great value in helping to assure a 'level playing-field' for the different actors involved, but needs to be planned and implemented with care in order to avoid risking damaging the credibility of the local actors by leading to accusations of external political manipulation.

Regarding future actions for the continued assessment of the problem, there needs to be increased contact with other actors and understanding of their respective perspectives. The landowners have already contacted CARITAS to put their point of view. However, reaching the Government is, in this moment, of high priority.