Report on Summer Research: Climate Change, Buen Vivir, and the Fifth Invasion of Guatemala
By Michael Bakal, M.Ed, MPH
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As we look out onto the idyllic landscape of the Rio Negro community from the banks of the Chixoy Resovoir in Baja Verapaz Guatemala, it is hard to believe that submerged under the waters of the reservoir are the homes and bones of hundreds of innocent people who were killed to make way for this hydroelectric plant. Along with five colleagues, I've travelled to this remote community, 25 miles away from the municipal seat, to conduct interviews as part of a baseline assessment for a climate change adaptation project I will be working on with Voces y Manos, a nonprofit organization, with funding from UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies. Before starting the project, we seek to learn more about the histories of the five communities that will be involved in the project, one of which is of Rio Negro.

Don Julian — 67 years-old — is one of just three designated historians from the Rio Negro community. He shares his knowledge of Rio Negro's singular history with extraordinary generosity, filling in the brutal yet impersonal sketches I had read in history books with vivid accounts of unthinkable human anguish.

The abbreviated version of this history is as follows: In 1975, thanks to substantial loans from the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank (both largely funded by the United States), Guatemala's National Institute of Electrification released plans to create the largest hydroelectric facility in the history of Guatemala on the Chixoy River. The Maya-Achí community of Rio Negro was one of 33 indigenous communities slated to be displaced by the proposed project, yet none were consulted in this fateful decision. Instead, the Guatemalan government created a so-called "model village," later named Pacux, to house the forcibly displaced residents of Rio Negro. With virtually no land to grow crops or harvest firewood in this community of tightly packed houses (the so-called "model village," common during Guatemalan military rule, was designed to facilitate maximum surveillance of indigenous communities), a great many families refused to leave Rio Negro.

Responding to the community's resistance with shocking and overwhelming brutality, the Guatemalan military and paramilitary killed 444 people and burned down villages in a series of five massacres between the years 1980 and 1982. A great many children lost one or both of their parents. In the end, all survivors were forcibly relocated to Pacux, and the community of Rio Negro was abandoned and then submerged under the rising waters of the reservoir.

What I did not know, until meeting with Don Julian, was how the community of Rio Negro had finally re-established itself, more than a decade after the massacres. Don Julian tells us the story:

> One day, I went out to cut firewood for cooking. Because we had no land in Pacux, I had to chop wood on communal land. Then, a man approached and started swearing at me, asking what I was doing on the land, which he said was not for people from Pacux. I had to return home to my family empty-handed, with no way to cook our food. I cried in pain and frustration. It was then that I decided to return home to Rio Negro.

Carrying nothing more than several pots for cooking and plastic sheets to protect from the rain, Don Julian, his family, and two other families set out walking at 3:00 AM on the 25-mile footpath to Rio Negro. Their first simple meals were cobbled together from the few edible plants they could gather and from fish from the reservoir. They slept beneath their plastic sheets.

Eventually, they were able to acquire aluminum roofing from a local parish and were able to build homes. They advocated for and persuaded the local government to build a small elementary school and health clinic. As residents of Pacux saw Rio Negro's incipient success, more families decided to move there. Today, Rio Negro is home to 19 families who support themselves by fishing, farming, weaving, and leading historical tours for visitors.

Yet just as Rio Negro has begun to flourish, a new existential threat — climate change —began to loom on the horizon, threatening the life that Rio Negro's residents have painstakingly fashioned from amid the ashes of their razed village. Rabinal falls within a region of Central America known as the dry corridor, a band stretching from Guatemala to Nicaragua that is especially vulnerable to drought. According to USAID, Guatemala is among the ten countries in the world whose populations are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and Rabinal — which includes the village of Rio Negro — is one of 54 municipalities in Guatemala whose risk level is classified as "severe."

What does this designation mean, in concrete terms, for farmers in Rio Negro? As Don Julian explains, it means living with the constant risk of crop failure, even famine. Elders in communities throughout Rabinal have told us that a brief dry spell — called *la canícula* — has been a predictable, if inconvenient, part of the local weather system for as long as they can recall. Yet in the past, this brief drought would last no more than two weeks, at which point frequent afternoon rains would resume and the harvest would be saved. Yet in recent years, *la canícula* has lasted for as long as 6 weeks.

Because the vast majority of subsistence farmers in Rabinal and other parts of the dry corridor rely entirely on rainfall to grow their staple grains of corn and beans, a drought of this length spells disaster. It is likely that this year, farmers in Rabinal will lose 80% or more of their corn crop. If this happens, families will not only lose their primary sources of food. Because of diminished supply, the price of corn will increase in local markets, forcing farmers to now pay a premium to purchase the grains they had invested countless hours of time and energy into growing on their own.

International agencies have been tracking and attempting to predict the long-term impacts of climate change on Central American subsistence farmers, and their predictions are alarming: if climate change progresses under "business as usual" scenarios, as many as 3.9 million Central Americans could become climate refugees by 2050.

As many have pointed out, one of the great injustices of climate change is that those communities and cultures least responsible for causing the problem — particularly indigenous communities, poor communities, communities of color, and those in the global south — are suffering the overwhelming brunt of its consequences. But even this assertion, important as it is, leaves much unsaid. It is not merely that indigenous and other vulnerable communities are not to

blame; they have been actively resisting many of the projects that portend climate catastrophe — from logging to mining to oil extraction — and they have all too often paid the ultimate price for it. This was the story of the Rio Negro massacres in 1982, and it was also the (largely untold) story 2018, a year in which eighteen indigenous land and water defenders were killed in Guatemala.

Maya Scholar Giovanni Batz describes the history of Guatemala in terms of "the four invasions": (1) the Spanish conquest, (2) the theft of indigenous land in the early 1900s to create large *fincas* owned by the Guatemalan oligarchy, (3) the internal armed conflict of the 1980s, and (4) the boon in megaprojects such agrobusinesses, mining, and hydroelectric dams that have accelerated since the signing of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) in 2006. We might add to this a fifth invasion—climate change. Seen from this perspective of the four invasions, colonization of indigenous territories in Guatemala never really ended, but has simply changed forms to meet the demands of Western markets at each new historical conjuncture.

The difference with climate change, the fifth invasion, is that the economic model that once allowed industrialized nations to reap seemingly endless profit from the lands and labor of the colonized and enslaved now threatens rich nations as well. If we are lucky, self-preservation will lend urgency to the imperatives of justice and compel those in positions of power to finally listen to the voices of indigenous people calling on us to rethink the fundamental premises of our economic system.

My summer research provided me with the opportunity to think deeply about these questions – not only in dialogue with elders from the Rabinal community like Don Julian, but also with young people from the community. I participated as a researcher-educator in an eight-week, youth-participatory action research project in which young people from the community of Rabinal explored the concept of *Buen Vivir,* loosely translated as "living well," and its implications for their communities as they face the threats posed by climate change. The concept of *buen vivir* first emerged among indigenous groups in South America, but has had had broad resonance, including in Central America.

I learned more from these young people and elders than I can include in this report, but here are a few of my take-aways:

- I learned that in the local Maya-Achí culture, all living things are seen as "having their mystery," or "having their own God." In this cultural system, which has survived despite hundreds of years of colonization and exploitation, both biotic and abiotic elements of the environment deserve respect. For example, before planting a seed, traditional farmers will ask permission from the earth to scar her surface. They will also negotiate with the rodents and insects on their lands: "You may help yourself to *some* of what I grow," they will say, "but you must leave enough for me and my family to survive on as well." It is a worldview that one local scholar described as being based on *subject-subject* relations, in contradistinction to the *subject-object* relations in much of Western thought.
- The United States has a responsibility, as the principal emitter of greenhouse gases, to help those communities most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. But the old

model of "development," with its assumptions of linear progress, often at the expense of natural ecosystems and human cultures, will have to be seriously rethought.

- *Buen vivir* represents a compelling alternative not because it offers a pre-determined solution, but precisely the opposite: it is an open concept, that invites reflection by local communities on their past, present, and future they want to create. It allows for a new model of working toward just futures rooted in indigenous epistemologies, value-systems, and relations.

What particularly struck me, as a student of cultural-historical approaches to education, is that while the concept of *Buen Vivir* has attracted significant attention in the field of international development, it has received only scant focus within the education literature. I began to wonder what approaches to education would be consistent with a *buen vivir* framework. What ideologies are implicit in the ways we think about educating young people and adults, for example, as we wittingly or unwittingly prepare them to compete in the capitalist economy, and what new pedagogical tools and approaches do we need to prepare young people to thrive in a world premised on a need for mutualistic relations among humans and between humans and other life forms?

I was grateful to CLAS to be able to begin exploring these questions as part of my pre-doctoral research, and to have the opportunity to partner and work with indigenous leaders, scholars, students, and educators in Rabinal community. I left the field with many lingering questions, but clarity that I want partnership with the community to be a cornerstone of my research approach. As the conversation with Don Julian reminded us, climate change is not the first existential threat faced by his communities. The tools and resources that have enabled Maya communities to survive colonization and genocide will overlap and substantially inform the strategies that will allow them to survive and adapt to climate change.

**sections of this report were excerpted from a blog I wrote for the Voces y Manos website, and can be found at www.vocesymanos.org*