

From ActionAid Guatemala

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Agrofuel production and the loss of peasants' lands

The unprecedented expansion of mono-product plantations dedicated to the production of agrofuels, mainly African palm and sugar cane, are changing the physiognomy of the Guatemalan agricultural field at an accelerated pace. By 2008, an estimated of 260,896 hectares were dedicated to sugar cane production and 83,385 hectares to African palm production.

In order to continue expanding their plantations, the agrofuel companies are grabbing lands of small owners and peasant families who were able to legalize the tenure of their land and received property deeds only after the Peace Accords were signed in 1996. In some cases, the agrofuel companies are also buying or renting old latifundia. But, in all cases, the expansion of the mono-production implies the loss of areas for food production, as well as the elimination of remaining forests and drying up water sources and wetlands. This is consequence of fragmentation or elimination of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity.

For the peasant families, the loss of their lands entails serious consequences for their nutritional security, since, in the past, their income was integrated by the economic activities carried out in the parcel: agriculture, livestock, handicrafts, trade and extraction of different products from the forest. The increasing difficulties to access to land entail, at the same time, a violation of their collective rights as Indigenous People.

ActionAid presented its report *2Plantations for bio-fuels and loss of land for food production in Guatemala*”, which is the result of a year long investigation.

Nowhere is the agrofuels threat being felt more directly than in ActionAid’s Sayaxché Development Area. The indigenous Maya Q’eqch’i are being enticed to sell the land, they were awarded after the war, to a company that grows African palm, leading to more poverty and hunger in the communities.

The Maya Q’eqch’i were displaced during the war. They gained small plots of farmland through the efforts of the National Council for Displaced Persons of Guatemala (CONDEG), which negotiated a piece of land previously occupied by the army in Sayaxché. The people from this community survive through subsistence agriculture with corn and beans being the staple foods. Basic services are patchy and when ActionAid began working with this group, they were poorly organised.

In 2008, ActionAid Guatemala started to support CONDEG as a partner organisation in Sayaxché DA. CONDEG has become a powerful reference point for organising rural and urban displaced populations, working to secure land tenure and access to land for resettlement.

As land sales have become an issue, CONDEG and ActionAid are organizing communities to defend their land and end the sale of plots. They have contributed to capacity building in the 15 communities in the area (a total of 930 adults and 710 children), with support for 14 community development projects.

ActionAid and its partner have also established the Committee for Displaced Women, promoting gender equity as well as promoting the participation of children to defend their rights and negotiate peacefully.

Both organizations have also upheld the memory of the martyrs who died fighting for a better life for the poverty stricken communities and children. These people continue working to enforce their rights as displaced, indigenous and poor victims of the war.

