**Responding to the Crisis of COVID-19 (and Capitalism):**

**Land Defence in the Face of State-sponsored Dispossession and Food System Shock**

**Abstract:**

This briefing provides a situated glimpse of the COVID-19 realities faced by Indigenous communities and land defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean. Via focusing on the experiences of Maya villagers and organisers in Toledo District, Belize, we bring together local knowledge, grassroots insights, and social movement-generated data on what the pandemic has produced apropos food system shock, escalations in attempted land grabs, and state-sanctioned violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. We begin with a broad overview of how the coronavirus outbreak has affected food systems across Latin America and the Caribbean whilst recognising the prevailing role the corporate food regime continues to play in agricultural production and movements for food sovereignty. We then detail a recent flashpoint land conflict in rural southern Belize during which Maya farmers and forest guardians documented government-sponsored encroachments onto communally held Maya lands without consultation. In sum, via a place-based vignette, our piece aims to raise critical consciousness about broader land and food system struggles that differing agrarian-based Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities are engaged in across Majority World contexts.

**Key Words:** food systems; Free, Prior, and Informed Consent; Indigenous people’s self-determination; Latin America and the Caribbean; Majority World social movements

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**Indigenous Realities under COVID-19 and the Corporate Food Regime**

Whilst there is more than enough food across the planet to feed the entire world’s current population, food insecurity and struggles for food sovereignty continue to pose persistent challenges across a multitude of present-day societies. This is especially true for Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities in the Majority World who have historically been the targets of colonial dispossession, institutionalised racism, and in more recent times, extractivist “development” agendas. According to the International Labour Organisation, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced nearly three billion people into either full/near unemployment, which has resulted in higher rates of food insecurity. Locking down a country, while necessary to mitigate spiking infection rates, can also cost a given nation up to three percent of its respective GDP per month, which negatively affects social welfare provisioning.

For the sake of simplicity, we are defining food insecurity as a lack of physical, social, and economic access to safe and nutritious food that meets the dietary needs of any given individual and/or community. Food sovereignty, on the other hand and drawing from *La Via Campesina*, is “the peoples’ right to determine their food and agricultural systems and the right to produce and consume healthy and culturally appropriate food.” Factors such as dispossession, poverty, lack of access to land and/or seeds, political-economic instability, armed conflict, forced displacement, extractivist-driven environmental degradation, disasters, and erratic seasonal changes related to shifting climate patterns all exacerbate food insecurity and foreclose possibilities for food sovereignty. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the corporate food regime’s inherent inability of to “feed the world” while simultaneously aggravating the enduring problems of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. Subsistence-based rural communities, in particular Indigenous and Afrodescendant groups, are experiencing the deleterious upshots of the pandemic disproportionately.

For example, across Latin America and the Caribbean, numerous Indigenous communities are still not receiving the healthcare assistance and economic support they require to ameliorate the vulnerable conditions they have been placed in. COVID-19 has also led to lockdowns, which restricts the movement of people and hinders the practice of traditional agroecological farming techniques such as swidden agriculture. Lockdowns across the region have included strict health protocols, police enforcement, and the prohibition of freedoms to enter or exit certain geographic areas. While necessary to prevent spread of the virus, the level of lockdown intensity has varied across the region and the measures put in place by several governments have not taken the livelihood strategies and unique specificities of agrarian-based Indigenous and Afrodescendant groups into account.

In turn, there has been a pattern of lockdown implementations, relaxations, and renewals that have generated myriad hardships for rural subsistence-based groups with community-based economies and who collectively organise to grow and share food and/or guard forests. Notably, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peasant groups across the heterogenous region, even prior to the pandemic, faced increased risk of ill health due to malnourishment as a result of living in isolated areas where once communally held lands have been privatised and access to government resources and medicine has always been low or non-existent. Some states have even used the crisis as an opportunity to grab land. Considering these realities will hold firm until a vaccine arrives across the Majority World and is distributed evenly to communities who have been placed at disparate risk, it is obvious that the virus poses a serious threat to the livelihood strategies of people who live off the land, as well as both local and global economies.

**The Political Economy of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The impact of COVID-19 on the global political economy, regional food systems, and agrarian communities has been devastating. In several countries across the Majority World, including Latin America and the Caribbean, measures put in place to contain the virus have not only affected the supply of food products, but have also led to a shift in market structure, composition, and demand. Food system disruptions induced by the pandemic are being manifested in three direct ways: (1) impacts on production and incomes; (2) shifts in demand; and (3) disruptions to supply chains.

Regarding the influence on production and income in Latin America and the Caribbean, limits placed on mobility due to lockdowns are contributing to labour shortages across the agricultural sector, particularly those characterised by seasonal labour demand or that require labour-intensive production. This carries impacts on harvesting processes and can lead to production and wage losses and/or market shortages. Moreover, the pandemic is negatively affecting the availability of necessary system inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, machinery, and capital. These losses are compounded by reduced off-farm incomes and restrictions that prohibit the collective work and exchange of seeds, crops, and food that is common amongst peasant societies.

In the case of consumption patterns, economic shocks induced by the pandemic are expected to reduce overall demand, particularly for higher-value products. The closure of restaurants and other foodservice providers has caused market contraction. Many anticipate these shifts will lead to long-term changes in dietary habits and consumer behaviour, as well as adjust production and distribution patterns. Notably, in Latin America and the Caribbean, these economic and food system shocks are more challenging for small-medium-size enterprises, cottage industry owners and subsistence-based farming communities. Rather ironically, several global markets-focused organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have noted the hardships generated by pandemic also present “new business opportunities” for farmers to explore.

The pandemic and attendant lockdowns have caused disruptions to supply chains across both the global corporate food regime and localised social and solidarity economies. Detrimental impacts continue to be felt across differing workforces, ranging from the physical symptoms associated with COVID-19 to negative mental health effects spurred by isolation, depression, and anxiety. Economically, health-related impacts have led to reduced productivity and added costs related to the implementation of more strident health and safety requirements. Moreover, lockdowns are anticipated to have major effects on the provision of safety, quality, and certification checks that are required for trade and the shipping of produce. In addition, COVID-19-induced border closures and conveyance checks are causing delays to transport services, which is having ruinous effects on perishable products like seafood, fruit, and vegetables.

In short, the fallout(s) of the pandemic––and more readily corporate food regime–– in 2020 began suddenly and continue to carry devastating repercussions. Food insecurity, malnutrition, and hunger emergencies are raging across dozens of countries and food riots have already occurred in India, South Africa, and Honduras. Less attention, however, has been paid to state- and corporate-sponsored land predation that has coincided with the pandemic. On this front and amidst the multiple crises prompted by COVID-19 (and arguably capitalism), several states have reacted with authoritarianism and militarised repression. As a response, peasant movements and political activists from all over the Majority World continue to both document and resist the violations of human and land rights they are experiencing. The Maya communities of Toledo District, Belize provide one such example. Notably, even after the Maya’s watershed 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice land rights victory and during a global pandemic, the Government of Belize (GOB) is still attempting to grab Indigenous lands.

# Crisis as Opportunity: Land Predation and the Capitalist State[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to a press release issued by the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) and Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) in early November, during late October several Maya villages in Toledo District, Belize reported that speculators were illegally opening survey lines in an attempted land grab. Several of the lines, which were established without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), cut through forests, corn and cacao fields, and the living spaces and homes of Maya families. State-sanctioned FPIC violations against Qʼeqchiʼ and Mopan Maya communities have been documented and ongoing for decades.

The most recent encroachments are occurring five years after the Maya won an unprecedented legal victory in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) regarding the recognition of Indigenous land rights. The 2015 CCJ decision affirmed that communal land tenure of Maya communities is commensurate with property rights found in the Belizean constitution. Since the ruling, however, the GoB has been non-compliant and refused to engage in meaningful processes of delimiting and protecting Maya lands, which are conditions of the CCJ order.

Investigations led by Maya Alcaldes (traditional leaders) into the recent unauthorised surveying revealed that those involved include foreign parties, non-Maya individuals from outside of Toledo District, and speculators from southern Belize. Surveyors were claiming as many as 30 and up to 400 acres of land, which contravenes the 2015 CCJ order, not to mention the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which the GoB voted to adopt in 2007. Land predation of this nature, which violates FPIC, has historically facilitated dispossession, corporate extraction, and environmental damage to Maya lands.

# Cease and Desist: The Maya Response

Upon being alerted of the incursions by village leaders, the MLA and TAA issued a formal statement reminding the GoB that it is legally obligated to:

...cease and abstain from any acts, whether by the agents of the government itself or third parties acting with its leave, acquiescence, or tolerance, that might adversely affect the value, use, or enjoyment of the lands that are used and occupied by the Maya villages, unless such acts are preceded by consultation with [Maya people] in order to obtain their informed consent.

In an interview shortly after the encroachments were reported, Maya land defender and MLA spokesperson, Cristina Coc, pointed out that the spike in FPIC violations were coinciding with the run-up to the recent national election in Belize, stating:

There’s always been incursions on Mayan land, this is exactly why we went to the courts (CCJ) to seek affirmation of protection. At the same time, however, there is an alarm because there has been an increase in the volume and frequency of land surveying right now in Toledo District in the last hour before election. And so one has to ask the question whether or not it is politically motivated, and whether or not it is related to what we have seen historically in Belize, where around campaign time politicians offer land in exchange for votes… ...we hope that the government will address these ongoing violations, which are in direct conflict with the CCJ order and we denounce these actions.

Upon denouncing the attempted land grabs at a hearing before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), the MLA and TAA submitted a request for precautionary measures against the GoB to halt all illegal activity. Rather than being an isolated issue related to the ownership of private property, movement activists reiterated that grabbing communal Maya lands poses a grave threat to the material wellbeing and cultural survival of Qʼeqchiʼ and Mopan people who are experiencing the slow violence of dispossession and extractivism.

In short, this is a story about Indigenous resistance to ongoing assertions of (post)colonial power, capitalist logics, and Western worldviews. Evidence of this is made clear given the GoB is based upon a Westminster model of governance imposed by British imperialists that has failed former colonies all over the world. Moreover, the GoB has a track record of abetting multinational corporations while repudiating Indigenous people’s claims to communal land ownership, notions of complex tenure, and right to self-determination.

# Denial and Disavowal: The State Response

The GoB’s response to the Maya came on October 30th. While Patrick Faber, leader of the then ruling United Democratic Party, admitted that, in accordance with the CCJ decision, the presence of surveyors without the consent of the Maya would indeed be illegal, he dismissed the allegations by the Maya and Coc by stating:

I listened very carefully as Miss Coc spoke and there is no evidence to that [surveying] happening… ...again, if indeed the land that she says people are surveying is the communal land that has been awarded to the Mayan people in that area as their customary land, then that cannot happen. So, everybody would know that is the case and then they will have a case in court if that is the point if that is true. But I don’t have any evidence that that is happening and it is apparent to all who is listening to what she said that she doesn’t have any evidence. She is only telling you what she saw and what people reported is happening but no concrete evidence of anything happening.

Despite the Maya issuing written reports with photographs to both the Lands and Surveys Department and Attorney General, the GoB rejected the claims by suggesting there was no evidence. Incidentally, for nearly a year in 2015-2016, Coc, along with 12 other Maya activists, were detained, jailed, and dragged through the courts by the GoB after protecting a sacred heritage site against similar incursions. Despite the criminalisation, all the charges levied against the Maya environmental defenders were eventually dismissed.

Similar to Faber’s response, on the same day, Belize’s Attorney General, Michael Peyrefitte, made the following statement, directed at Coc:

…if you have a legal issue ma’am, go dah court. To me, you don’t really have a legal issue because if you had a real legal issue, you would go to court, you wouldn’t go to the media. But they are hoping that they could cast enough doubt on the situation that will make the government look bad… ...that [CCJ] consent judgment states in there clearly that no part of this consent judgment affects the sovereign authority of the GoB and the people of Belize. In short then, that area da noh wahn separate country, you know, that is still a part of Belize. They may not like to hear that, but that’s the case. So, nothing can stop the executive of the country to do what it feels like it needs to do for the betterment of the country.

The Attorney General’s response ignores the actual allegations being made against the GoB. Instead, Peyrefitte suggests the encroachment claims are irrelevant because “they want their own country,” which is a rhetorical attempt to undermine both Coc’s credibility and the validity of the reports issued by Maya Alcaldes. Not only was the state’s evasive response a divisive disavowal of Maya land rights, but it is also arguably hostile and dehumanising as it prioritises the desires of private capital over Indigenous people’s self-determination and livelihood strategies, which the GoB has a history of.

# Parsing the Rhetoric: State Authoritarianism vs. Indigenous Autonomy

When we consider the GoB’s response alongside the ongoing struggle for Indigenous land rights in southern Belize, three issues require urgent attention.

Firstly, good faith leadership is lacking given the government refuses to investigate the claims of Maya Alcaldes. The GoB’s insistence that, because the Maya used the media to raise awareness about FPIC violations, they do not have a “real” issue is arguably as nonsensical as it is contrived. That is, when Indigenous people exposed state-sponsored land grabbing in the media, they were promptly met with baseless accusations they had no evidence.

Secondly, when Indigenous people report violations to government agencies, agencies are slow to investigate––if state officials even take their claims seriously and investigate at all. Moreover, arguing Indigenous people must always operate (i.e. “go to court”) *and exist* on the state’s terms is colonial. This is not an uncommon refrain from the state, though, as the GoB realises that going to court for rural subsistence-based Maya communities is an expensive and protracted process. Certain government agents also realise that, even if the courts rule against the state, it can get away with violating decisions and rule of law, as it has done before.

Lastly, the imperious tones of Faber and Peyrefitte’s responses are not only dismissive, but dangerous––and not only for the Maya. In particular, Peyrefitte’s concluding line: “...nothing can stop the executive of the country to do what it feels like it needs to do for the betterment of the country.” This is authoritarian nationalism par excellence and should be disconcerting for the whole of Belize.

The GoB’s lack of rights-based leadership and draconian posturing is nothing new. Back in 2015, when the CCJ ruling was passed in favour of the Maya, the GoB’s Attorney General was quick to diminish Maya customary tenure by stating Indigenous land rights “cannot trump the constitutional authority of the government.” Hence, it appears what the state is willing to take the lead on, consistently, is refuting the rights of Indigenous people and fettering Maya autonomy.

While the GoB’s most recent statements continue to rebuke Indigenous customary systems such as the Alcaldes and communal land holding, they also reveal: scepticism towards the word of the Maya people; state dereliction of the duty to consult; and even failure to follow its own statutes. In turn, the state’s response to the recent land grab allegations raises pressing questions. Why, when under legal mandate to protect Maya land rights, are the claims discounted without investigation? Furthermore, in addition to photographs and reports, what would satisfy the state’s need for and definition of “*concrete evidence*”?

The reports of incursions by Maya leaders afforded the GoB the opportunity to demonstrate good faith adherence to consent processes and strengthen its relationship with Maya communities. It was also a chance for state officials to denounce FPIC violations, prevent deleterious land encroachments, and uphold its obligation to protect customary Maya land rights, as ordered by the CCJ. Instead, the GoB doubted the veracity of the Alcaldes’ reports, attacked the credibility of Maya people, attempted to turn the larger population against the Maya, and declared to all citisens of Belize it could impose upon them whatever it wanted, arbitrarily, for “the betterment of the country.”

# The Reality of Land Grabs under COVID-19

In speaking to the realities of Maya families who must defend land whilst trying to socially reproduce themselves amidst a global pandemic, MLA spokesperson Cristina Coc sums up the attempted dispossession as follows:

...not only are farms and milpas being affected, but even residential areas where we have our own villages living. This is concerning because it impacts our livelihood, and we have seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic how valuable land is, and how valuable the production of land is for the food security of Mayan communities and Belizeans alike.

We recognise that the government cannot feed our people, they cannot employ all of our people, they cannot rescue us from this economic spiral that we’re experiencing. But what we can do is provide full security for our people by protecting their tenure on the land...

...it is very alarming that the government would allow such actions–––the Maya communities have been informed and are aware that there is a standing consent order that affirms our rights and protects ancestral rights to lands and territories.

In sum, the authoritarian behaviour and contemptuous rhetoric of the GoB continues to disrupt Indigenous life and close avenues for Maya people to exercise their rights and have their voices heard. It is also signalling to all Belizean people that the state is more than willing to sacrifice the rights and wellbeing of some (i.e. the marginalised) at the altar of “development.”

1. Part of this section first appeared on NACLA’s non-refereed site: https://nacla.org/news/2020/12/13/maya-land-fpic-belize [↑](#footnote-ref-1)