

# GUATEMALA: NATIONAL FRAGMENTATION, LOCAL COHESION

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



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This report presents case study findings from a two-year research and policy-dialogue initiative that explores how international peacemakers and development aid providers affect social cohesion in conflict-affected countries. Field research conducted by leading international scholars and global South researchers yields in-depth analyses of social cohesion and related peacebuilding efforts in Guatemala, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. Principal case study specialists for Guatemala include Sabine Kurtenbach and Otto Argueta. The project was coordinated by the Sié Chéou Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver from 2012 - 2014, and supported by a generous grant from Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion and International Affairs.

# 1. INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL COHESION VERSUS NATIONAL FRAGMENTATION IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala is deeply divided along three different, yet overlapping social cleavages—ethnicity, residence (urban-rural), and income level. Conflicts related to these divisions are shaped by claims for social justice, access to land, and improvements in economic, political, and social participation. Critically, international peacebuilding and development cooperation in Guatemala has underestimated the importance of local dynamics for the emergence of national-level cohesion. Horizontal social cohesion that cuts across dominant ethnic cleavages remains, primarily, a local experience, while deep fragmentation dominates the national level.

Overall, four key findings emerge from assessment of social cohesion, identity-based conflict, and donor strategies in Guatemala:

- Guatemala lacks vertical cohesion between the state and society, largely due to the existing development model, which benefits urban elites and fails to reduce deep social inequalities between rural/indigenous and urban/Ladino communities.
- The state's repressive approaches toward protest and localized conflicts leads to the escalation of social violence, and the prior experience of civil war generates fear and mistrust that make organization and mobilization of resistance to state repression very difficult.
- Patterns of horizontal social cohesion, or "bridging," exist in the indigenous regions, often with the support of religious institutions.
- International development assistance has served as a substitute for state social policies focusing on empowerment and improved services for marginalized groups. Overall, international actors have not been able to press for more than formal institutional changes.

## 2. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS: REPRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND THE CYCLE OF STATE-SOCIETY TENSION

Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 1996 that ended Guatemala's long-running civil war, donors and religious institutions attempted to implement programs to protect vulnerable minorities, strengthen social cohesion, and establish better relations between society and the state. However, armed violence and identity-based conflict remain persistent features of Guatemalan society. Recurrent violence and inter-group conflict in Guatemala is perpetuated by a lack of vertical cohesion. The state responds to indigenous group mobilization, particularly in the arena of environmental inequalities, with highly repressive tactics, including the selective targeting of movement leaders and organizers. Social inequalities are not addressed, and human security remains a pressing concern.

Clashes over environmental issues are a consequence of social inequalities and the most important cause of social unrest in Guatemala. Threats to local natural resources serve as the primary motivation for inter-group mobilization that cuts across ethnic differences. Most protest groups are local, highly informal movements, often organized through religious communities. Social protests against mining and hydropower exploitation help unify a wide range of identity-groups and social movements, with different levels of organization, yielding a sense of social cohesion at the local level.

Multinational mining companies have undermined dialogue mechanisms for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and governmental authorities have responded to local conflicts using repressive tactics to maintain social stability. At the same time, representatives of the private sector call for a broader use of the military to control social protest. Therefore, one of the most important triggers of conflict in Guatemala is a lack of popular consultation processes, furthering the divide between society and the state.

The case study, thus, argues that:

- Violent protest occurs in Guatemala most often when communities realize that all possible political and institutional mechanisms are closed to their demands. The state, then, responds with repressive tactics and targeting of leaders of protest movements, leading to a corresponding upsurge in conflict, the weakening of dialogue mechanisms, and the hardening of public security forces' tactics in dealing with social protest.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL-DOMESTIC INTERACTIONS: INDIRECT APPROACHES TO BUILDING A MORE COHESIVE SOCIETY

Guatemala received significant amounts of international development assistance during the last two decades, with most programs addressing the issue of social cohesion indirectly. Most aid was directed towards the poorest (indigenous) locations and reconstruction of infrastructure. International cooperation targeted improving vertical social cohesion (state-society relations) through poverty reduction, the promotion of human rights (especially indigenous rights), and access to the rule of law and reform of state institutions.

International donors, however, learned that these "top-down" approaches raised expectations for the state at the local level, which triggered many indigenous groups to organize (across previous identity-based divisions) to claim rights to inclusion and participation in the state. At the same time, donor influence on dominant elite groups and state responses to local claims has been low. As a consequence, the state responded to mobilization and protests with the criminalization of protest and repression through the state's security sector.

During the war and the first postwar years, many donors worked with Guatemalan NGOs, promoting the professionalization of civil society organizations. NGOs and civil society organizations, however, remain highly dependent on donor financing and tend to orient themselves towards donor interests. Thus, many Guatemalan NGOs are perceived as being externally governed. In some cases, this has led to a disassociation from grassroots support and triggered a rise in complaints about the "NGO-isation" of social movements.

International support for Guatemala has fallen in recent years. As Guatemala emerged as a middle-income country, based on stable macro-economic performance, patterns of aid changed toward loans over donations. This increased room for the Guatemalan government to maneuver and obtain loans with fewer conditions. A second cause for decreasing international aid was donor fatigue. Very little progress was made in the implementation of the peace accords. The government dismantled or downsized many of the institutions established for the implementation of the peace accords such as CAS, CENAP, SEPREM—the government even returned money to UNDP, claiming it did not want to be manipulated by external actors.

Currently, many actors of international cooperation are reducing their presence or leaving the country. For example, when the UN mission overseeing the peace accords (MINUGUA) left the country at the end of 2004, other donors also reduced their activities, consolidating them into regional programs, channeling them via Multi Donor Trust Funds or withdrawing completely. Priorities of donors differed regarding the role of the state in development as well as how to address the high levels of social violence. Although donors attempted to improve coordination through the Group of 13, the changes in priorities of international development actors created instability and limited the possibilities of contextualized and long-term programs.

Donors still operating in Guatemala focus on achieving the MDGs, improving governance – particularly in the area of the legal system – and strengthening previously marginalized sections of the population, especially women and indigenous groups. Geographically speaking, the focus is on the regions where the indigenous population is in the majority. As such, international cooperation addresses social cohesion, indirectly. Three prominent examples show the problems and pitfalls of the indirect approach toward building formal state institutions as the primary modality for reducing violent, identity-related conflicts: 1) promoting dialogue between the state and civil society; 2) supporting the reform of state institutions; and 3) access to the rule of law.

## STATE-SOCIETY DIALOGUE: MULTIPLICATION AS PACIFICATION

Donor experiences with engaging both the state and civil society in Guatemala illustrate two fundamental problems of fragile statehood. Guatemalan governments have compensated for their lack of will to implement fundamental social reforms by multiplying dialogue processes on a very diverse range of issues, with the support of donor expertise. However, through these processes, civil society was “pacified” without state-level changes to redress communal grievances.

International cooperation also supported different models of inter-group dialogue on controversial issues such as land rights and public security to foster channels of communication between the state and civil society. For example, the European Union finances “National Dialogue” and the monitoring of conflicts through the Human Rights Procuraduría, and the UNDP supports the National System of Dialogue. However, dialogues suffered from lack of focus, an inability to bring relevant actors to the table, and a failure to translate dialogue into policy changes. The main challenges experienced during these programs are as follows:

- There is a lack of trust in state institutions, due to prior civil conflict. Thus, indigenous groups were very suspicious and resistant to state-led (even if donor supported) dialogues.
- Systems of early warning and mechanisms of civil conflict resolution are not fully effective in the absence of political action. Effective conflict mitigation depends on the will of the government to respond to grievances voice during dialogues, which can only be influenced to a limited extent by development cooperation.
- Early warning systems are politically sensitive and demand a high level of transparency and accountability – and consequently the establishment of trust. This is particularly true for post-war societies whose previous history is marked by state repression.

## POLICE REFORM

Increasing levels of armed violence that followed civil war in Guatemala led to significant donor involvement in programs dealing with public safety or citizen security. The UNDP, the EU, Spain and Germany have been advocating fundamental reforms in the public security institutions at least since 2007. The increase in violence and drug trafficking complicated police reform further as crime permeated new institutions. Regular dismissal of police officers because of corruption and criminal connections has become common, and as a consequence, former soldiers were accepted into the police service and links between the police and parallel powers were reinforced. Overall, the military has preserved high levels of institutional autonomy and impunity regarding human rights violations during the war, and local security actors face major challenges in governing violent criminality.

A major focus, especially by the EU and Spain, has been support for the National Civil Police (Policia Nacional Civil, PNC). This included the recruitment of indigenous personal in the Western Highlands to increase trust and access of minority groups to the security apparatus. Postwar security sector reform was designed to achieve political subordination of the military. The army was downsized, the military budget was reduced, territorial coverage was reorganized, military intelligence was restructured, paramilitary organizations were dissolved, and a new military doctrine was established. These formal institutional changes occurred in a context of strong political struggles inside the military and high levels of distrust among conservative political and economical elites. Powerful economic elites and conservative political groups remained confident that the army was the only institution capable of preserving social and political order during the democratic transition. However, due to the persistence of corruption and the power of criminal networks, police reforms have not yet yielded results in reducing insecurity as a means for improving inter-group trust and social cohesion in Guatemala.

## **RULE OF LAW**

Another important line of donor support has been in strengthening the rule of law and combatting impunity. Donor projects aim at improving access to the legal system, particularly for the poor and indigenous population, and at supporting changes in juridical proceedings that do not comply with international standards. Various donors have invested heavily in recent years in improving access, modernizing, and professionalizing the legal system, particularly in rural areas. In addition, many donors attempted to document past human rights violations and promote rehabilitation, compensation and reconciliation. This type of support has proven difficult, and, politically, it has been highly controversial.

For example, the international commission against impunity (CICIG) is an interesting case of donor cooperation and existing political blockades for reform. The CICIG is the first experience of an international intervention to investigate and prosecute networks of corruption inside a state. The experiences with CICIG are an example of the difficulty of domestic – international cooperation around the issues of impunity and corruption. Mistrust of conservative groups to the work of international donors in the country has undermined the effectiveness of the process. After five years of activities the Commission still investigates corruption in Guatemala, although without any final sentences in judicial courts. After a number of internal and external crises, including the change of Commissioners three times, the CICIG will end its activities in Guatemala in 2014.

## **RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL COHESION**

During the five years there has been a significant amount of mobilization and inter-group cooperation at the local level, mostly related to socio-environmental and land conflicts. Churches often accompany communities in many of these conflicts and are deeply involved in processes of mobilization and protest. Religious organizations help create social solidarity and engage actively with communities' demands. Some religious organizations accompany indigenous protest groups, providing a space for discussion or meetings, publicity and advocacy at the national and international level.

However, leaders of indigenous social movements, religious organizations, and individual leaders (priests, laymen, even bishops) are often the targets of political violence. They receive threats, are criminalized and many times attacked or even murdered. Reports of national as well as international human rights organizations (Such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Peace Brigades International) provide vast evidence on these efforts to intimidate and threaten those either demanding the implementation of codified rights or protesting against specific policies or projects. In a climate of fear and a lack of justice for past human rights violations, violence reinforces low levels of organization and political grievances. In Guatemala, building social cohesion and working to change the status quo remains a very dangerous enterprise.

## **4. PRINCIPAL FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Historically, the lack of vertical cohesion in Guatemala constitutes the core of a political economy based on exclusion and inequality. Racism is a fundamental ideological mechanism to justify such exclusion and structures the way institutions function. Major gaps between rural and urban life worlds remain, despite of some improvements in education and poverty indicators. Social policies have failed to compensate disparities produced by an unequal socio-economic system. While the state continues to neglect the need of social policies, international cooperation (at the national level) and religious organizations (at the local level) substitute some of the development tasks supposedly exclusive to the state.

While the common experience of war and violence has supported the unification and ethnic self-identification of indigenous groups, this has not included the development of a unified political project at the national level. Racism, a lack of political representation, and continued marginalization of the indigenous population perpetuates unrest and social inequality, and state repression of popular expressions of dissent leave little room for growth in the arena of vertical cohesion.

Overall, the case study shows that international cooperation stands in the middle of a political game between the interests of the state in using international resources to compensate for structural deficits without changing its political agenda, and the interests of international governments on funding transformation projects without taking political responsibility. The result is a loss of important opportunities to effectively allocate international funding to address the real needs and grievances of the population. Social cohesion continues to be elusive on both horizontal and vertical levels. Current modes of international engagement empower local groups without having a real impact on the state structures and the political process. Without significant pressure on the state to address issues of political access, social, and environmental marginalization, international efforts to build social cohesion will have only a limited impact in Guatemala.