

NO LAND IN PARAGUAY

By William Costa



Members of the Tekoha Sauce community, one of 38 Ava Guaraní communities displaced during the construction of the Itaipú Dam, Sept. 1, 2019. Photograph by William Costa

Paraguay's nineteen indigenous groups abound in diversity. From the Paĩ Tavyterã communities of the subtropical northeast to the Ayoreo tribes in the far reaches of the arid Chaco region in the west, they each have unique cultural and linguistic heritage. In spite of these differences, they all face similar challenges as a result of negligence and discrimination from the Paraguayan state. While the government's department of tourism adorns its information offices in Asunción—the capital—with indigenous crafts, other state institutions continue to pursue a development model benefitting an economic elite while robbing indigenous people of their land, culture, and the most basic of public

services. Urgent measures must be taken by the state to protect indigenous rights and begin to repair the social, cultural, and economic damage dealt by a history of destructive policies.

The approximately 117,000 people self-identifying as indigenous in Paraguay—roughly 2 percent of the population—face extreme hardship: they are the sector with the country's lowest living standards. A 2015 report by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples reveals that 75 percent live in poverty. Notably, while on average across Paraguay 26 percent of under-fives live in extreme poverty (households with less than \$1.90 per

day per person), this figure stands at 63 percent for the indigenous population. The report mentions that indigenous people have low access to electricity and running water and that 40 percent are illiterate compared to 5.1 percent of the non-indigenous population.

Fewer People, More Soy

In recent years, the crisis affecting indigenous groups has become increasingly visible to urban Paraguayans, who have historically been geographically and culturally removed from the trials of native groups in the country. Paraguay's media shows increasing numbers of indigenous people, especially children and the youth, to be living in squalid conditions on the streets of Asunción. Something is clearly not working for Paraguay's indigenous population.

At the problem's core is the issue of land access. The preservation of indigenous territories has a vital role in maintaining spiritual, cultural, and communal well-being as well as providing subsistence through hunting and gathering. Despite this important reality, many indigenous communities' bonds with their land have been shattered. The 2015 UN report states that 134 of Paraguay's almost five hundred communities are landless and a further 145 are facing land possession issues, such as ownership disputes with private entities.

This directly violates Paraguayan law, which recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples, including guaranteeing them

access to land. It also represents a failure to uphold international conventions on the rights of indigenous peoples of which the state is a signatory. Far from remedying this situation, the Paraguayan state's actions inflict further damage.

The land access issue seems an unlikely problem in Paraguay, given its low population density: just eighteen people per square kilometer, half that of the United States. However, a long history of policies favoring accumulation by a wealthy few has made Paraguay the country with the world's highest inequality of land distribution according to the World Bank. In a country where agriculture is the main source of wealth, 2.5 percent of landowners control at least 85 percent of the arable surface area and have devoted most of it to cattle ranching and growing soybeans for export. The state has historically favored the elite while causing enormous hardship for indigenous and small-scale farming groups.

Stroessner Divides the Cake

This process of state-endorsed accumulation of land gained great traction during the 1954–1989 right-wing authoritarian dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. The dictator illicitly gifted almost seven million hectares—around 17 percent of Paraguay's surface area—to friends, family, and political allies. Indigenous groups living in these areas—never granted titles to their ancestral territories—were simply brushed aside as the land made its way into private hands.

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Notably, the violence inflicted upon the Aché people in order to eject them from their territories has been described as genocide by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA).

The infrastructure megaprojects that Stroessner held up as his modernizing achievements also involved violations of indigenous land rights. Some thirty-eight Ava Guaraní communities were brutally relocated as land was expropriated for the construction of the Itaipú Dam—currently the world’s second largest hydroelectric dam—between 1973 and 1984.

The fall of Stroessner in 1989 and the ensuing democratic transition have done little to improve the lot of indigenous groups and there is much empty rhetoric surrounding issues involving indigenous peoples. While presidential campaigns have often included promises to address the situation, this has not been translated into reality. For example, shortly after winning the 2018 elections, current president Mario Abdo Benítez declared he would give indigenous peoples “special attention” so they could enjoy “dignified lives”. Over a year into his mandate, these claims have yet to materialize.

The state’s land policy is defined by extremely close bonds between the political and landowning elites—in many cases they are one and the same—which guarantees the dominance of a pro-business model privileging private interests over those of communities. Consecutive governments’ extremely low tax rates and lax enforcement of environmental laws have provided

conditions for an explosion in commercial farming. The expansion of cattle ranching and an enormous boom in genetically modified soy have wreaked havoc on Paraguay’s once extensive natural reserves while allowing for further concentration of land. Only 10 percent of the formerly vast Atlantic Forest remains, and the Chaco region is experiencing some of the planet’s highest deforestation rates. If environmental laws are not tightened and better enforced, this trend is effectively guaranteed to continue; the result is sure to be disastrous both for the nation’s forests and its indigenous peoples.

The depletion of virgin areas leads ranchers and farmers wishing to further expand the agricultural frontier to look covetously at the territories of indigenous peoples. Illicit strategies, such as falsified titles and violent evictions, have been deployed to take control of indigenous lands, taking advantage of the scarcity of communities’ economic and legal resources. A 2018 report from the IWGIA labels the state’s response to this situation as entirely insufficient: to date, no mechanism has been established to deal with indigenous peoples’ land claims and complaints. As a result, the process of recovering land is frustrating, arbitrary, and unjust. In many cases, communities are simply ignored by authorities. It is therefore essential that an efficient mechanism is created as soon as possible to provide a clear and functional route to land reclamation.

Governments of the post-1991 democratic era continued to play an active role in the displacement of indigenous peoples, showing extreme bias toward private

interests. Amnesty International points to a three-stage persecution process repeatedly deployed by authorities. Communities are first stigmatized through the media and official statements. They are then forcibly evicted through a questionable use of the justice system and security forces. Finally, unfounded judicial proceedings against community leaders are used to “kill” the cause.

Examples abound. Police evicted the Itakyry community from land they claim is theirs at the end of 2018. Communities such as Tekoha Sauce—one of the thirty-eight Ava Guaraní groups evicted during the construction of Itaipú—and Takuara’i have faced violent, state-assisted persecution and criminalization when attempting to reestablish settlements in the territories from which they were forcibly removed during the dictatorship.

If the land rights of indigenous people are to be respected, the Paraguayan state must reassess its development model. By continually providing economic, political, and legal advantages to wealthy landowners, the state has effectively placed a death sentence on the survival of indigenous ways of life. There must be an end to the persecution of indigenous people struggling to retain or regain land and there must instead be an emphasis on simplifying this process through legislation.

Not Just Land

Though the issue of land access is an enormous part of indigenous people’s suffering, it is far from the only problem. The effective absence of basic public services underlies communities’

difficulties. The 2015 UN report states that indigenous children complete on average just three years of schooling, while the figure for the population on average is eight years. Furthermore, roughly two-thirds of communities do not have access to health facilities of any kind. Measures must clearly be taken to guarantee universal access to education for indigenous peoples. An emphasis must also be placed on producing educational materials that respect the culture and language of the community in which they are to be deployed.

Indigenous people must also contend with the difficulties of environmental destruction produced by the agricultural boom of recent decades (as outlined in the IWGIA report). They are continually exposed to the dangerous health effects of agrochemicals used in the soy fields that now surround many villages. In addition, communities must deal with fires caused by burning practices employed to clear land for agriculture. Earlier this year, a large part of Jasuka Venda—a wooded area that is the most sacred site of the Paĩ Tavyterã people—went up in flames. There was no state response.

The widespread loss of Paraguay’s forests has also limited most indigenous communities’ possibilities for using traditional knowledge to live from the natural resources around them. As such, they are obliged to enter into the mainstream economic system to survive. Endemic racism and a lack of educational opportunities leave them with little options other than to take work under difficult conditions. *The Guardian* reported last year that indigenous people have been recruited

in the Chaco to do agricultural work best described as debt slavery.

The negligence shown by consecutive Paraguayan governments toward the indigenous population is encapsulated by the poor condition of the National Institute for Indigenous Affairs (INDI)—the state institution responsible for representing indigenous interests. The UN Special Rapporteur described INDI as poorly funded, poorly staffed, and unable to fulfill its functions. The institution has also been at the center of large corruption scandals: in 2018, a former INDI president was jailed for embezzlement following his misappropriation of approximately \$520,000 earmarked for the restoration of land to two indigenous communities. The indigenous sector has repeatedly discovered that it can expect little from INDI.

A Strong Indigenous Movement

In the face of these numerous adversities, a strong indigenous movement comparable to those seen in other Latin American countries has not emerged in Paraguay. However, there have been some recent victories. The 2018 elections saw the first ever participation of an indigenous political party—the Plurinational Indigenous Movement of Paraguay (MPIP)—which presented a

candidate for the senate. Additionally, in October, indigenous communities protested on an important bridge near Asunción and achieved their goal of forcing INDI president Ana María Allen to step down from her position—they did not consider her a suitable representative of their needs.

Considering the ever-increasing pressure on indigenous lands from the agricultural sector and the many human rights violations by the state, these steps forward by Paraguay's indigenous peoples are admirable. In order to win future victories and oblige the state to fulfill its duty as guarantor of rights, indigenous people will need to strengthen their organizational capacities and deepen relationships with other socially conscious sectors.

The Paraguayan state, and society more broadly, must recognize the deep injustice to which the nineteen indigenous peoples have long been subjected. While Paraguay sinks below an ever-expanding green sea of soy, they are denied land, food, health, and education. Government policies must now be redirected to address the extreme power imbalance between social sectors. Sadly, under the leadership of President Abdo Benítez, this change of direction is hard to envision.



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