Panama: The community of Caisán: for 'free rivers' and community-based energy

In the last two decades, we saw many villages in western Panama dispossessed of their lands, due to a large project called Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). Our community of Caisán, in the province of Chiriquí, was the first in the country to confront this model of dispossession and accumulation that the PPP was promoting – and attempting to disguise as 'clean' and 'renewable' energy.

In 2001, the government of Mexico launched the PPP, now known as the Mesoamerica Project. Its objective was to integrate all of the Mesoamerican territory, connecting southern Mexico to Panama through the construction of highway systems, electrical interconnections and telecommunications. The main focus was to develop the region's energy resources: oil, gas and electricity. In other words, the goal was to create infrastructure to transport and connect raw materials, energy resources, cheap labor, and communication systems – in accordance with the interests of corporations and markets in the US.

To this end, the PPP began construction in 2006 on one of its main projects: the Central American Electrical Interconnection System (SIEPAC, by its Spanish acronym). The need to generate energy to feed this system prompted the construction of hydroelectric dams. We witnessed how some of the almost 85 hydroelectric dams projected to be built in Panama came off the page and began to materialize (1). There were many impacts in our communities as a result of this 'development' – which was presented as 'sustainable.'

Caisán is located in the province of Chiriquí, near the Chiriquí Viejo River – which is one of Panama's main river basins and a key element in the country's hydroelectric projects. At that time, a mercantilist logic was applied to Panamanian energy policy. The privatization of the electricity system meant that water was treated as a commodity, not as a social right.

From their desks, governments formalized permanent water contracts that gave both national and transnational hydroelectric companies the right to access almost all of the water capacity of our rivers. The companies had legal backing to use and divert up to 90% of the rivers' flow.

All of the companies claimed that their particular hydroelectric project would not have any major negative impacts. However, none of the entities – the governments, financial entities or companies – took into account the serious cumulative damage of all of these companies' actions together to our communities and to the ecosystems of the Chiriquí Viejo River hydrographic basin.

In order to justify the massive construction of dam projects on a single river, and in most of the important watersheds in Chiriquí province, the government used misleading terms such as: "clean energy" projects, "mini-dams," "run-of-river dams" or "waterfall dams."

In this context, the communities have resisted, demonstrated, raised awareness, and anticipated the problems that would be created by establishing hydroelectric projects. And we, the members of the community of Caisán, were at the forefront of this resistance.

Image

Map of hydroelectric projects on the rivers of Chiriquí. Source: Gutiérrez, A., González, J. (2023)

Impacts of dams

We had never seen a hydroelectric dam in Caisán. In fact, when the first meetings to organize the community against the projects began – even though we couldn't imagine what a hydroelectric dam looked like – we already had enough information about the harmful impacts. So, in 2007, we started campaigning in the communities where the first projects were starting.

The governments argued that the Panamanian energy grid was transitioning towards renewable energy, which would be clean. But we have talked about this in the community, and we do not agree with calling it "clean energy." Because the companies that came to use the force of the river to produce electricity took the water. They took it away and didn't bring it back. These companies transform the territory, because when they dam the water they take it away, leaving the rivers dry. Furthermore, the reservoirs are static, full of algae, and even have garbage accumulated in them. Trees fall into the rivers, and are then dragged towards the reservoirs; and there is a lot of sediment. So it does not give off the impression of being clean.

Additionally, when the first hydroelectric dams were inaugurated in the Caisán region, we saw how the areas around the dams became private property. Areas that used to be freely accessed – where we used to go swimming or fishing, or where we would transit and cross into another territory – now had a big gate with a sign that read: "Private property, do not enter." And they hired private security.

What's more, they told us that there would be work, and that conditions in the community would improve. But we observed that many people who went to work got sick, and then were not hired for a long time. On top of this, many people who came from other places to build the dam brought vices with them; and so for the first time in Caisán, there were brothels and many problems related to alcohol.

As we predicted, some farms were left with dry rivers and lakes; these farms ended up without water because, in addition to damming the river water, the hydroelectric plants diverted the groundwater that used to flow through those farms.

We used to have fish in the river that swam from the sea and went up the river toward the mountain. Those fish reproduce in one place and live in another, and they used the river to travel. However, they could no longer do that because there are many hydroelectric dams on a single river.
Not to mention the fact that, after all of this, most people in the community of Caisán still do not have

access to the electricity generated by these hydroelectric plants.

Community organization

Faced with this situation, we began to take some actions in 2007 to stop these projects in Caisán. The first action we took was to try to diplomatically ask the mayor's office and the government to declare the river as a regional municipal heritage. Apart from that, we mobilized a large number of people to protest at governmental spaces, to pressure them to meet our demands. When we did not get a positive response from the Governor's office or the Mayor's office, we began to take more energetic actions. We organized street closures to try to stop the construction of hydroelectric plants.

That struggle continued for many years. There is an emblematic video from that period, from 2011, made by a local organization of affected people who were fighting against these extractive projects. The name of the organization is Foundation for Integral Develompent of Corregimiento de Cerro Punta (Fundiccep, by its Spanish acronym). The video is a historic record of the fight against hydroelectric dams in Panama, and it shares the voices of comrades who fought and defended the territories. These comrades say:

Five years of struggle, five years pointing to the risks and threats, five years asking for people to pay attention to the destruction of the rivers. There is no authority, there is no deputy, there is no governor who is listening, 'because the noise and lights' of these projects and their big economic benefits have been stronger than the outcry of the people who are asking for justice and equity. (...) And even though we see some water flowing in the rivers, it will not be available anymore, it will no longer be 'ours.' It will belong to someone else, to a businessman who lives far from this place, who does not understand and will not understand why the river is part of our life."

Finally, hydroelectric plants have not generated development for the communities; they have neither brought us closer to energy, nor lowered the cost of electric service. They also have not improved the living conditions of our communities.

And yet, we feel now, after so many years, that all of that struggle was not in vain. Because we managed to make it not easy for the companies to obtain financing for their projects. Our mobilization succeeded in stopping a lot of the planned hydroelectric projects from happening in Chiriquí (about 23 were planned, but only 8 were completed). Also, we kept the Caisán River free, because they did not obtain the permits to do anything there; there was a lot of resistance.

Those of us who have been here, suffering from the consequences of these energy projects, do not see these as an alternative to replace fossil fuels. We see this energy transition as equally dirty as fossil fuels.

In any community that is currently being affected by the energy transition – and this transition means the exploitation of natural resources and of Mother Earth – it is necessary to find an alternative that counteracts this capitalist model. This model has been so imbalanced, and even expropriates our ways of life.

Energy by and for the people

We are peasants in my community, and we had heard a lot about biogas. Many people who have left the community have talked about how pig manure can be used to make gas. We have now installed several biodigesters in the community with the support of Fundiccep. The people from that

organization take action and fight to denounce the big projects, but they also propose projects and promote new kinds of energy, for example, by offering technical advice to the communities.

Biodigesters were originally thought of as an environmental solution to water contamination caused by community livestock farming, and as a complement to reduce the use of gas in tanks that have to be purchased. But then we tested using it to generate electric energy too. We connected it to a generator, and it started up really well. In other words, we were able to make that leap and produce electricity.

We have done this on a small scale, but if as a community we agreed to it, and had about 20 pigs and used all of their manure to produce electricity, it would be possible to produce enough energy for the uses that the community deems necessary. And it is a kind of construction project that can be done collectively.

When we have a biodigester and see how the whole thing works – what it looks like inside this big plastic container, with the methane gas transforming the matter inside it, and all of the energy generated as heat – we are, in practice, applying what we have learned about energy generation. And by explaining this process in the community, we reflect on how we see energy.

Obviously, there is a whole universe that opens up when we learn that nature provides us with multiple energy alternatives. We are always hearing on the radio, on television, or at school "that the sun, the air and the movement of the seas generate energy." But it is different when we can observe with our own eyes that this manure – which before might have been a problem – can now be the alternative or a source of another kind of energy. Then we look on all this with a great admiration, thinking that this really is ingenious, and the community can be the owner of this ingenuity and participate in it.

We thought that energy production was a very sophisticated equation that was barely possible for big machines, big companies or big capital. To learn that we ourselves could transform manure into gas on a small scale – or that we could transform that gas into electricity to drive an engine, for example – really changes the way we see things.

As a community we are committed to producing clean energy with what we have. We have heard accounts about how other communities in the world have already done this, and there are very low cost solutions. What is required is a high level of community participation to find solutions; once you have that, everything else is possible.

For any territory or for any people in the world who are trying to take action today – either to make use of the energies they have in their environment, or use some kind of energy they have available and which they see as an alternative – it is important to dream and to dream hard. Because capitalism has sold us the idea that everything has a price, that everything is a commodity, and it is not true.

Jonathan Gonzalez, activist and peasant from Caisán

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