

## The Damages of Development

***The Xalalá hydroelectric dam is a highly contentious mega-“development” project in rural Guatemala that would displace indigenous communities and damage the ecosystem under the guise of fueling free trade.***

Developers and government officials are eyeing the remote Ixcán, Quiché region of Guatemala for its rich natural resources. They are enticed by the profits to be gained by oil exploration, highways, and large-scale plantations of crops for bio-fuels. Investors also plan to exploit the region’s waterways to supply hydroelectric energy for the commerce expected to be generated by the new free trade agreement between Central America and the United States. One Ixcán-area proposal that has gathered steam in recent months is the Xalalá hydroelectric dam to be built on the Chixoy River.

The Xalalá dam would flood up to 26 miles along the Chixoy River and 10 miles along the Copón River. It would wreak havoc on the land tenure, food security, and livelihood of people throughout the region. The predominantly rural population of the Ixcán relies heavily on farms, forest, and waterways for survival. Todd Kolze and Kirsten Schwind note, “A



major resource for the region, the Chixoy River is currently used for fishing and transportation and as a water supply. The surrounding floodplain is a very fertile agricultural area where much of the corn for the region is grown.” Of the Ixcán’s population, 78% is indigenous and 88% lives in poverty (Source: UNDP).

The social and environmental effects of the Xalalá Dam would include:

- Flooding of 18 to 30 communities
- Displacement of 2,000 to 3,000 people, the majority Q’eqchi’ Mayas
- Disruption of habitat and migration of land-based and aquatic species
- Decreased water quality
- Reduced fertility of farmlands and forests
- Depleted fish stocks

*But don’t people want electricity?*

Ironically, even though a fifth of the Guatemalan population lacks electricity, the country is a net *exporter* of energy. However, access to electric service is highly uneven: 75% of Q’eqchi’ Mayas, compared to 13% of non-indigenous people, lack electricity in their homes (Source: UNDP). The construction of the Xalalá Dam would perpetuate rather than remedy this inequality: the electricity it generates would primarily fuel factories and large-scale commerce, and the local population would have no say in its management or distribution. Leaders in the Ixcán would prefer to meet local energy demand through environmentally-friendly, publicly owned, small-scale renewable energy sources.

In a referendum held in 2007, 89.7% of Ixcán's inhabitants voted against the construction of large hydroelectric dams, including Xalalá, as well as oil exploration in the region. The Ixcán referendum is part of a growing movement of local political consultations that directly challenge national policies and foster grassroots organizing. The grassroots "Ixcán Referendum Follow-Up Commission" engages in education, organizing, and legal strategies to ensure that the people of the Ixcán determine their own resource use and development priorities.

Disregarding the overwhelming opposition, the Guatemalan government is currently accepting bids from national and international investors interested in the Xalalá Dam. Bidding closes on July 31, 2008. The investor will conduct two years'



*Children in Ixcán, Guatemala hold signs proclaiming "Rivers are for life, not dams."*

worth of social, economic, and environmental studies; the same company will likely construct the dam as well. This period of bidding and feasibility studies represents a key window of opportunity to oppose the Xalalá Dam.

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The U.S.-based Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) supports the people of the Ixcán by providing physical accompaniment as a deterrent to violence and working to ensure that their political, socio-economic, and cultural rights are respected. Visit our website at [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org) to sign up for our e-lists, participate in urgent actions, become an accompanier, or make a secure donation.

Join with NISGUA and stand in solidarity with the people of Ixcán to defend their lands and livelihoods. Together we declare: "rivers are for life."

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#### *Resistance meets violence*

Resistance in Guatemala comes with a price. During the armed conflict (1960-1996), the Guatemalan military – operating with U.S. funding and support – targeted leaders and communities that resisted corporate-led exploitation of their land and resources. For instance, government forces killed 444 people in and around Río Negro, a town that vocalized its opposition to the proposed Chixoy Dam, a mega-project funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. To this day in Guatemala, environmental and human rights activists continue to experience threats, acts of intimidation, and violence. International solidarity plays a key role in drawing attention to this situation and preventing future attacks.