Guatemala – Case Study 6

Established Norms
In Guatemala, endemic corruption functions as an enabler of violent groups, which engage in illicit activities to make money and acquire weapons, or as a by-product of their efforts to capture local and national institutions and security forces, such as the police. Violent insurgents have used perpetual poverty and injustice in the country to justify their actions and recruit members, sustaining the cycle of violence (Samayoa 2010).

The Problem
Guatemala went through a civil war from 1960 to 1996 within the cradle of the peasant unionized movement. During the war, the army formed Cuerpos Ilegales y Apraratos Clandestinos de Seguridad (CIACS) (illegal groups and clandestine security apparatuses) as counterinsurgents, and promoted organized crime to finance them. Over time, the line between the political end and the criminal end became blurred with the emergence of a hidden power that has established a corruption-violence link, surviving the cessation of the conflict. When the war ended, CIACS continued its operation, furthering the political interests both of organized crime and real power in Guatemala. By 2002, CIACS had taken violent action openly against human rights defenders, journalists, judges, prosecutors, and politicians. The government, although aware of CIACS’ role in these attacks, was too weak to confront the powerful criminal group (Samayoa 2010).

Objectives/Strategies for Action
In Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, a town in the south of the country, a local citizens’ movement emerged in the aftermath of the civil war. Santa Lucia is unfortunately situated in a spot convenient to cross-border narco-trafficking from Colombia to Mexico. The objectives of the Santa Lucia movement were to win back the community from the drug lords and organized crime, promote economic and social development, prevent electoral fraud, challenge the climate of impunity, and defend the victories along the way.

Strategies involved innovative grassroots campaigns and civic actions to break up the corruption-violence nexus, maintain resilience in the face of violent repression, and foster social and economic development. The movement aimed at fostering coalition between the political party established by Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (former guerrilla groups) and the government to confront criminal activities, support fair local elections, and prevent drug lords from entering local politics. The civic engagement programs were specifically aimed at youth, who are often the targets of organized crime recruitment. As a result, strong public outcry emerged against government impunity of CIACS and its role behind violent crime and corruption.

An intensive civil movement also emerged at the national level that mobilized and garnered support from the international community, including United Nations, for dismantling CIACS operations. Together, these groups challenged government impunity for CIACS criminal activities. The coalition demanded the establishment of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). The objective was to initiate the dismantling of the clandestine security apparatuses operating in the country.

Tools and Techniques Used
Organizers built a strong coalition that included women, youth, and community groups. They conducted a wide and creative range of nonviolent actions, such as civil disobedience, demonstrations, monitoring of municipal officials and spending, literacy and development programs, radio call-in programs, theater, and recreation projects. These
efforts were recognized and further supported by donor agencies operating in the country, including the United Nations Development Programme and the Friedrich-Ebert Stifung foundation. A security plan was eventually developed with coordination among the donors and civil society activists.

Successively, monitoring of crime activities and reports about the situation of violence and the security plan were prepared and disseminated to the public. The security plan encouraged citizens and journalists to report on CIACS and organized crime, breaking the silence from decades of repression. The radio programs, forums, training, and university programs supported the campaigns. There was a mobilization of the human rights community, ombudsmen, and other civil society organizations. Statements and press reports against the government’s apathy toward CIACS crimes were issued. The international community supported this effort. Human rights organizations helped in networking and protecting activists at risk. Together, the coalition formed CICIG and advocated for the government to recognize it as a legal body. A broad coalition of government officials, human rights and civil society organizations, and ombudsmen supported the call.

Outcome/Impact of the Interventions

In spite of violent intimidation, kidnapping, and murder, civil resistance is ongoing, and solidarity networks have been established with other communities and citizen groups in the country and across borders. People have continued to monitor the criminal activities and actions of the new authorities in power. Solidarity networks have helped share information, experiences, and strategies, send out letters, and come to one another’s aid.

After large public actions targeting legislators, the government finally recognized the creation of CICIG and offered to support its objectives, although in practice the government has yet to prove its support.

The human rights defenders drew world attention to the struggle. Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa became the host of national and international meetings, thereby sending a message to the corrupt power holders that the country and the world were watching and stood together with the townspeople.

Lessons Learned

- A large public action pressured the government, which previously was too weak to confront CIACS crimes, to agree to join hands in creating CICIG.
- A coalition among community, national, and international groups helped pressure the government to create CICIG. In extending the arena of resistance from the local to the regional and international, the community increased people power.
- Success is based on capability to communicate the problem throughout local, national, and international levels and with different interest groups.
- The citizens’ movement led to the creation of an alternative system of civil resistance, involving national and transnational networking, solidarity, and actions.

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Sources
