



# Projecting Smallholders: Roads, the Puebla to Panama Plan and Land Grabbing in the Q'eqchi' Lowlands of Northern Guatemala

by Liza Grandia

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in the Q'eqchi' Lowlands of Northern Guatemala**

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*[On the map] Heavy lines radiated. . . in all directions by way of the tropics, figuring a mysterious and effective star—lines of influence or lines of distance, or something of that sort. Company promoters have an imagination of their own...These manifestations shook the soberest minds. For a time everybody in the islands was talking...and even those who smiled quietly to themselves were only hiding their uneasiness. Oh, yes, it had come, and anyone could see what would be the consequences—the end of the individual trader, smothered under a great invasion of steamers... ‘That’s what they call development’...”*

– Joseph Conrad, Victory: An Island Tale (1915:22-24)

## Introduction

From IIRSA (Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America) through the PPP (Puebla to Panama Plan) and onto Obama’s stimulus plan, governments and banks are co-financing the construction of a new wave infrastructure projects across the western hemisphere to support corporate trade and commerce. Despite hefty academic critique and civil society resistance in the 1980s and 1990s against unsustainable projects like hydroelectric dams and the trans-forest highways, the idea that high modernist infrastructure will ineluctably produce economic growth is experiencing a rebirth among the development planning elite. This paper explores the relationship between such infrastructure development and land grabs in northern Guatemala.

Many such infrastructure projects proposed under the PPP will crisscross the territory of Guatemala’s second largest indigenous group, the Q’eqchi’ Maya. These include the including the paving of the Franja Transversal, the construction of a new highway across southern Belize to Punta Gorda to reduce traffic to Puerto Barrios, hydroelectric dams, a natural gas pipeline, electrical grid connections to Mexico, port development, among other threats to Q’eqchi’ landholdings and livelihood. Far from new, these “neo”liberal infrastructure projects demonstrate clear continuities with prior “modernization” plans from the colonization (land settlement) era of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as classic Liberal development policies at the end of the nineteenth century to foment foreign investment.

While the displacement of Q'eqchi' smallholders by some infrastructure or extractive projects (e.g., flooding from dams or mining evictions) is dramatically obvious, the negative effects of roads tend to be more subtle. This is partly because smallholder land sales along roads appear to be voluntary, but also because it is so deeply engrained in the popular imagination that roads are vital for development. From the ambitions of Spanish conquistadores to build trade routes across Mesoamerica to the very first World Bank loan in Guatemala (Loan 0124-Highway Project (Johnston 2005), outsiders have long sought to construct roads as both literal and metaphoric paths to progress.

Although certain kinds of feeder roads can help farmers acquire better market prices, they also bring unwanted outsiders. While shorter travel times along paved highways provide villages quicker access to government agencies and health services, they also bring greater state surveillance and more frequent targeting by development organizations. As anthropologist Ralph Beals once noted, "If I were to rate the acculturative forces I have seen at work in various communities I think I would suggest that one road is worth about three schools and about fifty administrators" (1952:232). Like the hard railroad lines depicted in the epigraph, roads are a quintessential "distance-demolishing" technology (Scott 2009). Despite, or perhaps because of, the changes they have wrought to rural areas, they remain an iconic image of progress for both planners and rural people.

As an avenue for analyzing the impacts of the broader PPP infrastructure program on indigenous, rural areas, this paper explores the project(ile) qualities of roads. I begin with a history of road construction in northern Guatemala from Liberalism to modernism to neoliberalism, including an inventory of PPP-proposed roads in Q'eqchi' territory, many of which appeared in prior plans for the region. Contrasting these pass-through highways with

organic local roads, I then show how PPP roads likely accelerate land concentration in concert with complementary projects to make Mesoamerica more “legible” to outsiders (free trade agreements, land administration, and other forms of state surveillance). Beyond dispossession of smallholders, I argue that PPP roads produce another pernicious effect: the “projectization” of civil society. The paper concludes with alternative examples of small and “slow” infrastructure initiatives that might better stimulate the rural economy and protect smallholders.

## Puebla to Panama Plan

Although officially proposed by Mexican President Vicente Fox in 2000, the PPP was really the brainchild of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Meant to facilitate regional economic integration, this plan packages together a series of legal initiatives (standardization of customs procedures and deregulation) with construction projects (roads, port development, electric grids, hydroelectric dams). Budgeted at \$25 billion over twenty-five years, the PPP was predicted by IDB analysts to increase annual trade from \$5.1 billion to \$8.5 billion within the decade. Covering one million square kilometers and affecting a population of almost seventy million people, it represented an infrastructure plan for territorial restructuring unparalleled in Central America since the construction of the Pan American Highway. In 2001, the presidents of Mexico<sup>1</sup>, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panamá, and (informally) Belize signed onto a loose agreement to be administered by an unelected board of commissioners. Colombia joined the plan in 2007<sup>2</sup>, and the Dominican Republic and Ecuador requested observer status.<sup>3</sup> At a 2008 meeting in Villahermosa, Mexico, the presidents of

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<sup>1</sup> The Mexican states included in the plan are: Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Campeche, Tabasco, and Veracruz.

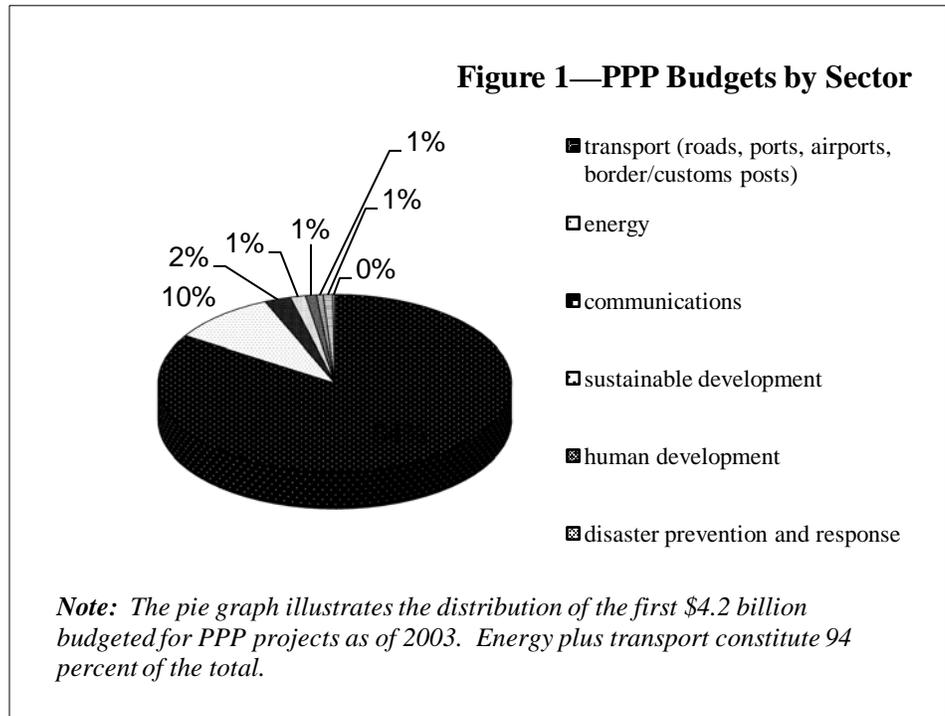
<sup>2</sup> Colombia’s President Alvaro Uribe suggested renaming it as the Puebla to Putumayo Plan.

<sup>3</sup> Sensing benefit to U.S. corporations, governor Jeb Bush even proposed that Florida should join (Barreda 2004).

Mexico, Colombia and Central America countries renamed the PPP the “Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project” (or Mesoamerica Project, for short). I continue to use the PPP terminology here, however, because the logic of the plan remains essential unchanged despite a cosmetically improved name.

Administratively, the PPP was organized into eight sectors shown in Figure 1<sup>4</sup>:

Each participating country headed one of these eight commissions, with Guatemala and Belize leading energy and tourism, respectively. As the pie graph illustrates, transport and energy



were to consume the overwhelming majority of PPP resources (AVANCSO and SERJUS 2003) and continue to be the main feature of the Mesoamerica Project. Although PPP documents feature rhetoric about the development of new industry in Central America, most critics believe these transportation networks will facilitate resource extraction and transnational shipping, with little local employment. Even the sectors that sound more friendly to people and the environment (e.g. human and sustainable development) involved technocratic projects like

<sup>4</sup> Other side issues of coordination that emerged in 2004 during the PPP presidential summit included concerns about transnational gangs and trafficking in small arms. These are more prominent in the newly organized Mesoamerica Project than the original PPP.

information systems and training workshops for economic integration. As Figure 1 illustrates, the vast majority of resources are devoted to transport, primarily roads.

Though ostensibly a Mexican/Central American initiative, geopolitical pressure for the PPP originated further north.<sup>5</sup> With the bulk of United States population on its east coast, North American-based corporations face a shipping bottleneck. The world's cheapest labor markets in Asia, especially China, are located half a planet away from its largest consumer base (Hansen 2004). As an alternative to expensive trans-U.S. land shipment or the now-saturated Panama Canal, the PPP is to build or upgrade 13,132 kilometers of highways to connect Atlantic and Pacific ports across the Central America isthmus and also shorten north-south travel times. Such audacious transnational road construction plans have not been witnessed in the region since the building of the Pan-American highway in the 1930s.

Now called the International Network of Mesoamerican Highways Initiative (RICAM, "Red Internacional de Carreteras Mesoamericanas"), this network of 13,132 kilometers is organized into five strategic corridors (Zunino 2010):

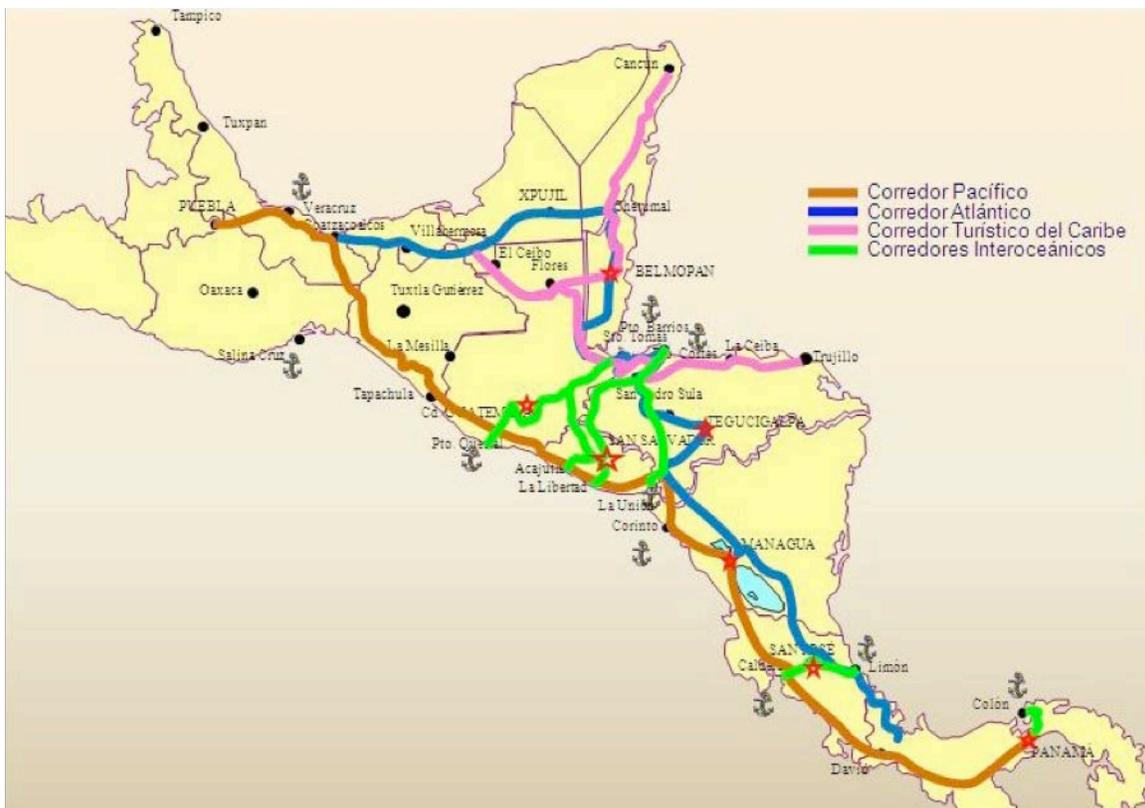
1. Pacific Corridor — Spanning 3,152 kilometers over seven countries, this is to be longest and most heavily used of the highway projects as a commercial freight route. Measuring 300 kilometers shorter than the congested Pan-American Highway, it will significantly cut shipping time.
2. Atlantic Corridor – This highway connection from Belize to Honduras is meant both to stimulate tourism and speed commercial transportation.

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<sup>5</sup> Since the Monroe Doctrine, most foreign investment in Mesoamerica has been from the United States. The Chinese government, however, has recently begun financing projects, including the renovation of the Guatemala City airport.

3. Caribbean Tourist Corridor – Perhaps the most controversial of the networks, this builds on an idea from the late 1980s to connect archaeological sites in the “Ruta Mundo Maya” (Maya World Route).
4. Inter-oceanic corridors – These 1,446 kilometers will connect Pacific and Atlantic ports for commercial freight across several “dry canals.”
5. Linkages – Another 4,225 kilometers are needed to connect the above routes (Ibid.)

**Figure 2—PPP Transportation Corridors**



To complement these road projects, the PPP also aims to harmonize border regulations. Indeed, what makes the PPP so worrisome are not just the negative social and environmental impacts of its big infrastructure projects, but its hidden agenda of trade harmonization. The PPP is not merely an infrastructure portfolio for development, but a far-reaching plan to develop a

transportation and industrial landscape amenable for the foreign corporations under the DR-CAFTA (The Dominican-Republic Central America Free Trade Agreement) approved in 2005.

Many of these PPP projects already existed; the IDB's contribution was to package them together under one umbrella, add some financial support,<sup>6</sup> and give it political spin. Other multilateral development banks and countries also pledged funding, but due to negative publicity surrounding the PPP, they avoided the vanguard protagonism of the IDB.<sup>7</sup> Though the PPP is not entirely synonymous with the IDB, suffice it to say that without the IDB's leadership, the PPP would not exist. Since the IDB's own financial commitments to the PPP are relatively small, the institution relies on the pre-emptive power of planning.

## **The Pre-emptive Power of Planning**

Ambitious in scope but with details shrouded in secrecy, the PPP immediately raised the suspicions of civil society groups after its official debut in 2001. The acronym invited alliterative reinterpretations by critics, such as: PPPetroleum; Projects, Privatization, and Poverty; Private Plans for Profit; or my own version, which would be something like Privatization and Primitive Accumulation in the name of Progress. Widespread popular dissent to the PPP led to cancellation or, at least, postponement of several projects. Despite these small victories, the scale of the PPP still poses a formidable challenge for opponents.

Although IDB spokespeople protested that opponents had mischaracterized the PPP, but provided little additional information (Barreda 2004). Projects appeared, then disappeared, then

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<sup>6</sup> When the PPP faltered in 2003, the IDB announced a four billion dollar line of credit for PPP projects.

<sup>7</sup> Other lenders include the World Bank, European Union, the Andean Development Corporation (CAF), the Central American Integration Bank (BCIE), USAID, and bilateral aid agencies of Japan and Spain that are well-known for funding infrastructure. The World Bank was clearly involved in early planning documents, but retreated upon early public criticism of the PPP.

reappeared in different parts of the PPP portfolio. For example, in a 2002 meeting I had with an IDB-Guatemala representative, he denied any funding from his office for the controversial hydroelectric dams on the Usumacinta River, but did not rule out the possibility of IDB-Mexico funding. As controversy around the dams continued, the IDB removed the project altogether from the PPP, but the Mexican government stepped forward to fund it. Whenever a project meets controversy, the IDB can remove it from the official list and deny institutional responsibility, but privately encourage a national government or the private sector to pursue it. This technique underscores the powerful momentum of planning—that is, the symbolic importance of getting a project rolling and the capacity for it to take on a life of its own beyond even the planners' control.

In addition to their ability to provide loans, international development banks wield intellectual power as collectors and disseminators of ideas. As one senior World Bank official puts it, “Lending capital is no longer the World Bank’s greatest asset on the global market; knowledge is. Knowledge is its greatest source of power” (Goldman 2006:100). Another Washington, D.C. World Bank manager candidly describes how they plant ideas and get projects moving behind the scenes:

‘...we need projects to come from the countries. So what we do is we put some people down there in this [policy institution] and their job is to foment projects... not design projects, but get the conceptual idea for projects and to sell it in the country, and then [the country representatives] come to the bank and say, “Hey, we need this project,” and [together we] get it into the pipeline and get it started.’ [Gould 2009:99]

Offering high consulting salaries, international development banks offer a revolving door for leaders of the private sector. As Goldman writes elsewhere, “The argument is not that the world is run by the World Bank president, but rather that the global political economy has at its core a

set of elite power networks in whose reproduction the World Bank is deeply embedded” (2004:12).

Although IDB resources invested in the PPP are significant, the real financial influence of the development banks is through the power of priority setting and project design. In 2009 alone, the IDB invested \$20 million in “technical assistance” grants and pre-feasibility studies for the PPP/Mesoamerica Project. IDB consultants working on the PPP explicitly aim to attract resources from other international donors and to leverage contributions from national governments. The new buzzword for the PPP is another PPP: what the United Nations has termed “public-private partnerships.” Corporate philanthropy, however, is rarely altruistic (Bishop and Green 2008) and often significantly less than public relations hype might lead one to believe. Typically, the public still shoulders most of the cost of these hybrid partnerships. In fact, over 90 percent of the PPP budget was initially constituted by loans and public investment.

Precisely because the PPP is so substantively weak, “devoid of specificity, lacking flesh and bone...contradictory, uncertain, gelatinous” (Moguel 2004), it relies on the power of soft suggestion. After all, plans are “never innocent...[they] either reinforce or challenge existing social and economic arrangements” (Schmink and Wood 1992:51). White puts it another way (1995:64): “Planning is an exercise of power, and in a modern state much real power is suffused with boredom. . . [which] works for bureaucracies and corporations as smell works for a skunk. It keeps danger away. . Power does not have to be exercised behind the scenes. It can be open. The audience is asleep. The modern world is forged amidst our inattention.” Perhaps that is why so many ill-conceived development project ideas reappear repeatedly (even across centuries) on bureaucratic agendas despite previous failures or public opposition, as evidenced by several roads planned to traverse Q’eqchi’ territory.

## Reincarnated Roads

A map of planned PPP routes are remarkably similar to ancient Maya trade routes (N. Schwartz, pers. comm.) As shown in Figure 3, a sophisticated network of roads and waterways connected city-states across the region prior to Spanish conquest.<sup>8</sup> Archaeologists working in northern Guatemala, for instance, recently discovered a twenty kilometer royal road between the sites of Tintal and Mirador that was thirty meters wide and two meters tall border and perhaps the largest structure in the western hemisphere at that time (D. Wahl, pers. comm. 10/7/05). When epidemic European diseases (often introduced in advance of Spanish conquerors by travelers) killed up to ninety percent of the native population, many of these routes were subsequently swallowed by jungle. Petén's forests and swamps became so impenetrable that the Spanish were not able to conquer this region until 1697, almost two centuries after the rest of Guatemala. Hoping to establish a royal overland route (a "camino real") between their established

**Figure 3—Pre-Columbian, Maya trade routes**

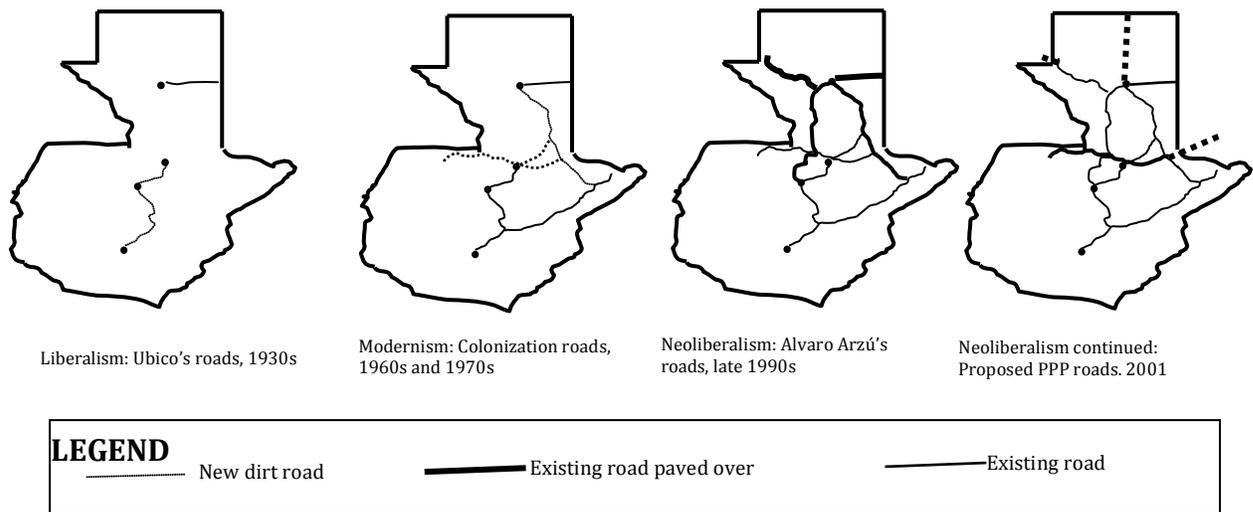


<sup>8</sup> Because the Maya curiously lacked wheel technology and endemic beasts of burden, all these routes would have been traveled by foot or boat.

centers of power in Santiago (Antigua) Guatemala, and Mérida, Yucatán, the Spanish rounded up native populations in this region between 1697 and 1707 (Jones 1997; Sapper 1985), but were unable to complete the road.

For the next three hundred years, the northern Guatemalan lowlands became a “region of refuge” for indigenous and landless peoples (Aguirre Beltrán 1970), especially the Q’eqchi’ Maya people. Meanwhile, a long line of national politicians and foreigners dreamed of building roads into this northern hinterland to integrate it into the national economy and open its natural resources for foreign investment, extraction, or export crops. Prior to the PPP, three waves of road building projects into northern Guatemala (Figure 4) were guided by similar ideological frameworks of Liberalism<sup>9</sup>, militarized modernism, and neoliberalism.

**Figure 4: A century of road development in the Q’eqchi’ lowlands**



<sup>9</sup> I capitalize Liberalism because nineteenth century liberals regarded themselves not in the contemporary, progressive sense of the word but rather as members of the ruling elite who felt that foreign investment and immigration were the ideal path to modernization. Likewise, Conservatives were conservative not in the contemporary, *political* sense of wanting to uphold traditional religious and personal ethics but in the nineteenth-century sense of hoping to maintain the traditional *economic* power of estate owners along with Catholic authority and landholdings. Put another way, Liberals wanted to rule by class, Conservatives by caste.

## *Liberalism*

Separated by the Cuchumatanes mountain range from the western highlands, the Q'eqchi' homeland of Verapaz was once relatively isolated from the rest of Guatemala during the colonial period and the first fifty years after independence under conservative rule. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Liberal merchant class seized power and sought to challenge the authority of the traditional landholding elite, including the Catholic Church by opening the country to foreign investment. In response to free land grants and other enticements offered to foreigners in the late nineteenth century, North Americans and Europeans (mainly Germans) established coffee plantations across much of highland Guatemala (Cambranes 1985). One region that proved particularly apt for this export crop was the department of Verapaz, which also had easy geographic access to the sea and, thus, closer ties to Europe than the rest of Guatemala (King 1974). From Cobán, exporters could send coffee beans overland on pack mules ninety kilometers to Panzós on the Polochic River; the cargo could then travel via boat to the town of El Estor ("The Store" in Spanglish) on Lake Izabal and be transferred to an ocean faring vessel down the Río Dulce (freshwater or "sweet" river) to the Atlantic Ocean and onto Europe (Collins 2001). So important was this transportation route that in the mid 1890s, German settlers raised one and a half million marks of private financing amongst themselves to build a railroad from Tukurú to Panzós.<sup>10</sup>

Within a decade of Liberal rule, the state had seized almost all of Q'eqchi' territory and re-allocated it to foreign coffee planters. In turn, coffee "necessitated the creation and organization of an entire infrastructure capable of promoting trade and speeding up the transport and loading of coffee and other products" (Cambranes 1985:47). The Guatemalan government

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<sup>10</sup> Despite ample funding, this German infrastructure project never came to fruition because the American contractor failed to deliver.

obliged by providing credit through a new national bank (established in 1873), loading docks to export the product to European markets, and roads (Wagner 1996). The newly landless indigenous were obligated by law and coercive debt practices to become resident-workers (*mozo colonos*) on the new coffee plantations in their midst. Any unemployed indigenous person could be conscripted for up to three months of labor as “zapadores” or road workers (Schmolz-Haberlein 1996).

The last and longest of a series of nine Liberal dictators ruling Guatemala between 1871 and 1944, Guatemalan president Jorge Ubico (1931-44) greatly intensified national road building efforts. He sponsored a 1933 road law (Decree 1474) known as the “vialdad” that required every adult male between age 18 and 65 to contribute two weeks of free labor a year to road construction (Schmolz-Haberlein 1996). Plantations or villages that would benefit from nearby road projects also had to provide free labor indefinitely—a practice, I might add, perpetuated in the present day by NGOs and government donors that require “matching contributions” of voluntary community labor for infrastructure projects. Before any major construction began, Ubico would send the police to arrest drunks at bars (“cantinas”), since prisoners could be forced to work for free.

Taking advantage of all these types of indigenous labor, Ubico opened the first all-weather road from Guatemala City to Cobán in 1938. As the first president to ever visit Petén by airplane, he wanted to extend this farther north, but only reached as far as Sebol. With dynamite, pick axes, and sweat, Q’eqchi’ elders today still remember opening these roads into the northern lowlands (Adams 2001). Many of these projects were improvements to roads first established by foreign coffee planters; for example, the Cobán-Chisec route was established on top of an old German road. Even as late as 1964, forty percent of all roads in Alta Verapaz were on private

property (Gobierno de Guatemala 1964). Other roads were built over footpaths that the Q'eqchi' had built with the soles of their feet through years of selection of the least muddy routes during the rainy season. Ubico, in fact, was famous for opening up roads “following the route of the Indians” (Casasola 1968:33; Benitez Caceres 1972).

Governing Guatemala during the Depression and renowned for his thrift, Ubico sought the least expensive but most labor-intensive construction designs—for example, wood bridges rather than steel or concrete. Requiring multiple repairs, many road projects were built and inaugurated, then re-built and re-inaugurated several times over—all with free indigenous labor. With the Department of Roads housed under the Ministry of Agriculture, these road projects were ostensibly for economic development, but Ubico was certainly cognizant of the expanded state power and political control it afforded him (Grieb 1979)

### *Militarized Modernism*

The nexus between road development, state surveillance, and land grabs in northern Guatemala coalesced once again in the late 1950s. After a CIA-led coup ended a brief democratic period in Guatemala (1944-1954), military officers seized control of government for four long decades of civil war. Following recommendations by U.S. advisors (Gobierno de Guatemala 1964; IDS 1961), they decided to open colonization projects in the northern lowlands to diffuse pressure for land reform in the more densely populated highlands. In response to new export opportunities under the Alliance for Progress, colonization planners viewed this northern hinterland as prime cattle country (Williams 1986). Discovery of oil in Petén also led the government to hope it might share neighboring Mexico's oil bonanza (Solano 2005; Byrd 1987). Military officers also reportedly profited from black market sales of archaeological pieces from

the many Maya ruins in the region. Taxes on the logging of mahogany and other valuable hardwoods became an important source of revenue (Schwartz 1987 and 1990).

The lack of roads in the north was an obstacle for all these extractive plans. According to a Guatemalan transportation survey, the areas north and west the ports of Izabal (departments of Petén, Alta Verapaz, Quiché, Huehuetenango, and northwest Izabal) had only a combined total of eight miles of paved roads (Williams 1986). CIA advisors to the military also considered road-building necessary for counter-insurgency efforts against guerrillas in the northern forests. With USAID grants and loans from newly established international and regional development banks (the World Bank, BCIE, and the IADB) the government launched three major road projects into the northern hinterland: (1) an all-weather dirt road from Guatemala City to Flores, (2) a connection from Sebol to San Luis, and (3) the Northern Transversal highway.

Inaugurated in 1970, the Guatemala-Flores road opened the vast forests of Petén to spontaneous colonization by landless peasants coming primarily from the “Oriente,” Guatemala’s southeastern region where civil war broke out in the 1960s. Q’eqchi’ people had already been migrating into the Petén via foot and boat and, therefore, tended to settle preferentially along rivers. Both groups were eligible to apply for legal title for land claims up to 45 hectares per family, but their paperwork languished inside FYDEP, the new agency in charge of allocating Petén’s arable land to colonists. In practice, FYDEP gave preference to the claims of military officers, cattle ranchers, and other absentee landlords from Guatemala City (Schwartz 1990; Casasola 1968).

Q’eqchi’ migration to Petén intensified when a road connection from Sebol to San Luis was opened in the 1970s. Three possible routes from Cobán had been considered (215 km. through Chisec-Sayaxché-Flores, 230 km. through Sebol-Flores, or 300 km. through Sebol-San

Luis-Flores) (Louis Berger, Inc. 1969). Oddly (or not), the longest route passing alongside then General Lucas García's father's cattle ranch, Tuilá, was chosen. A declassified U.S. Department of Defense report from May 1974 indicates that construction of the road from Boloncó to Tuilá had already begun unofficially: 'There appeared to be a stretch of road completed northeast of Boloncó, but Mr. Rosales said that it was only a few miles, and used primarily for bringing in mahogany logs to the nearby sawmill; completion of the Sebol-San Luis link was said to be in the next five-year plan to begin in 1975' (Department of Defense 1974:3). **President** Lucas Garcia (1978-82) himself acquired more than a hundred thousand acres in the greater Sebol region south of Petén, many of them purchased just prior to the announcement of these roads (Williams 1986; Solano 2005).

The third major road built in the northern lowlands was the Franja Transversal highway, initiated under the presidency of General Laugerud García (1974-78) as part of a broader colonization and infrastructure plan to extract mineral, petroleum and forestry resources from a 8,500 square kilometer belt located just south of Petén (Figure 5). An oil company, Basic Resources, simultaneously built a 235-kilometer pipeline alongside this new road for easy maintenance access (Figure 6). The three-part construction of the Franja highway foreshadows the public-private partnerships of the PPP. One sector was built from 1975-78 by the Army Corps of Engineers (Cadenas to Fray)<sup>11</sup>; the government's colonization agency, INTA, built the second sector from Fray to a village called Secacao just west of Raxrujá (from the mid-1960s to 1975) and finished another short road connecting Chisec to the Franja Transversal in 1977. In 1975 the Shenandoah oil company finished the last sector from Secacao to the Rubelsanto wells,

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<sup>11</sup> The Army Corps of Engineers continued other secondary road projects in the area, often using General Lucas's nearby Yalpemech ranch as a base of operations (Falla 1980; Solano 2000)



1. A proposed road *through the Maya Biosphere Reserve* to connect north central Petén to the Yucatán Peninsula via Campeche and/or Quintana Roo. Albeit originally suggested by the World Conservation Union about thirty years ago to promote regional eco-tourism, almost all biodiversity conservation organizations today would oppose any new roads in protected areas. Nevertheless, the Mexican and Guatemala

Figure 7—New roads in Q'eqchi' territory proposed under the PPP



governments continue to study two potential routes: (a) the opening of a new road from Carmelita through El Mirador into the Calamukul Biosphere Reserve and/or (b) the paving of an old logging road from Tikal through Rio Azul National Park into Mexico. A study by a coalition of conservation NGOs (Ramos et al. 2007) persuasively argues that the construction and maintenance of either of these routes would cost more in pure economic terms—not to mention environmental externalities--than transportation savings and tourism development might bring to Guatemala. According to them, he Carmelita-Mirador route would cause \$21 million in economic losses, with an additional value of \$26 million assigned to forest loss,

while the Tikal-Caobas route would incur total net investment loss of \$54 million, plus an addition lost of \$56 million caused by associated deforestation (Ramos et al. 2007).

Nevertheless, these roads remain under consideration, in large part because of lobbying by archaeologist Richard Hansen to make the El Mirador site accessible to wealthy tourists who would otherwise not be able to reach on foot via a two-forest trek with guides from the Carmelita ecotourism cooperative (Gómez and Méndez 2005). In 2008, the controversial Mirador connection was repackaged under a new program called “Cuatro Balam” (meaning “Four Jaguars”), for which the IDB pledged \$1.3 million. Now promoted by Guatemalan President Colom himself, the program aims to convert the Maya Biosphere Reserve into an archaeological “mega-park” and multiply tourism almost tenfold by linking the sites of Tikal, Mirador, Uaxactún, and perhaps even Piedras Negras by monorail.

2. *Completion of the **El Ceibo connection** between north-west Petén and Tenosique Mexico.* Although environmental opposition to another road to bisect the northwestern corner of the Maya Biosphere Reserve tabled the project in 2002, business interests continued to pressure for it. Road construction resumed in 2007 and it was inaugurated in late 2009. For the many Q’eqchi’ farmers settled along this route, this transnational border connection may fuel land speculation and increase illicit trafficking in cattle, agricultural inputs, drugs, and illegal emigrants en route to the United States (Arriola 2005).

3. *The paving of the 362 km Northern Franja Transversal highway with an extension to the Mexican border, renamed as the Northern Inter-oceanic Highway.* Having deteriorated significantly since the colonization period, the rehabilitation of this road became a PPP priority to increase trade between Mexico and Guatemala. In 2007, an Israeli company Solel Boneh International won the contract for the project at a cost of \$672 million (Solano 2007). The Guatemalan government also spent more than a hundred million quetzals in 2006 alone, upgrading three overland routes between Alta Verapaz and Petén branching off the Franja. The renewed focus on roads in this historic colonization region has catalyzed dramatic land speculation, causing many Q'eqchi' settlers to sell their claims. Coincidentally or not, the World Bank has also targeted this region for a land administration project, to be discussed more below.
  
4. *The paving of a highway southeast Petén through the Toledo district to Belizean ports.* This was initially proposed in the mid-1990s as an upgrade for a heavily populated road from Jalacté/Santa Cruz border to the Southern Belizean highway, but the project was halted after Belizean Maya activists mobilized to win a ten-year moratorium on land sales for two miles on either side of the proposed route. Then in 2004, the government secretly planned to move the route south to a region not covered by the moratorium by extending a dirt road from Crique Sarco village to the Guatemalan border via Dolores. A national currency crisis temporarily halted construction, but with funding pledged from the IDB, Kuwaiti and British

governments (Stepp and Lasseter 2004) it could be resume at any moment.<sup>13</sup> Recent reports from the field indicate that the government may soon resume the project as originally designed through Jalacté.

Each of these projects has been canceled at least once in response to public opposition. However, like the villain of a Hollywood horror film that simply will not die, these road connection mysteriously resurfaced in PPP inventories (Burgués 2005). Why do road projects, even ill-conceived ones, acquire such momentum? Maps can give roads that may be topographically unfeasible or environmentally unwise a clean, linear tangibility in the imaginations of desk-bound policy makers. For international donors, as well, roads are more visible and offer more public relations opportunities than more complicated human development initiatives. Construction companies may lobby for them, as millions can be made through slight padding of the projected price per kilometer. As Goldman (2006:x) concludes in his historical review of World Bank projects (many of them roads), corruption was not the exception to the rule; it “occurred *through* such development schemes, and not in spite of them” [emphasis mine].

Corruption seems endemic to Guatemalan road projects. This I learned after several fruitless visits to the headquarters of the Roads Department in the capital, hoping to gain access to their archives so as to construct a history of road projects in the northern lowlands to compare with my data on Q’eqchi’ migration patterns. Each day the subcoordinator pleasantly brought me a random file and assured me he would allow me into the archive the *next* day. On the third day, he admitted that even *he* is prohibited from borrowing folders from the archives for more than five or six days, and it would be impossible for me to enter. Perplexed by the unusual

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<sup>13</sup> Kuwait’s support is reciprocation for Belize’s contribution of troops to the first Gulf War. The British portion is to fulfill a long-outstanding promise to build Guatemala’s Atlantic highway as compensation for Guatemala’s recognition of British sovereignty over Belize. The IDB’s contribution is presumably under the auspices of the PPP.

secrecy, I visited the regional office in Petén for the Roads Department and learned that for regular maintenance of existing roads, private companies charge up to three times per kilometer than budgets for regional government road crews. The potential profits to be made by private companies who win contracts for the thousands of kilometers of new and upgraded roads proposed under the PPP must be staggering by comparison.

Although social scientists are keenly interested linkages between the local, national and international and patterns of capitalist penetration, little scholarship is devoted to the impacts of roads on people (Kyle 1996). Indeed, little research exists in Petén about the effects of road on farmers (Shriar 2009), but the general effect of roads on deforestation is well known (Sader et al. 1994, Grunberg 2000; Carr 2002; Ramos et al. 2007). Contrary to popular thinking, Millian (2008) argues that deforestation in Petén is actually less along some paved roads than along dirt feeder roads. The former were likely deforested before conservation organizations began monitoring satellite forest cover data from 1990 onward and/or offer more opportunities for off-farm employment. This study suggests that more research is needed to understand differentiated outcomes of shifts in transportation efficiency—that is, the relative impact of breaking new dirt roads, upgrading old dirt roads to all-weather gravel ones, and the paving of any of these types of existing roads. In addition to the quality of the road, the destination and direction of a road matters, as we shall see below,

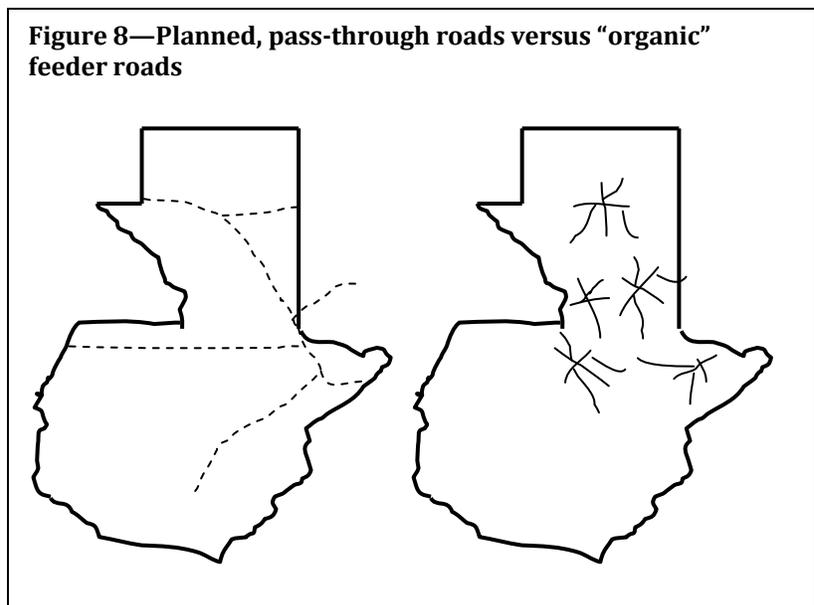
## **Organic and Synthetic Transportation Networks**

What all the aforementioned PPP routes have in common is that they are arterial highways for passing quickly through the Q'eqchi' region, not the kind of feeder roads that development experts have long know are better for small farmers and agricultural development

(Dozier 1969). Hidden from the planners' view is an organic transportation network built by Q'eqchi' people themselves. One fifth of Alta Verapaz residents lack access to vehicular roads, while another third suffer from weather closures (World Bank 2006). Yet, as Collins (2001:72) so nicely puts it, "one gets the sense that you could walk the entire length and/or perimeter of Alta Verapaz on these footpaths and never have to pass through a town center or on a road open to vehicular traffic."

Likewise, in Europe there were once two kinds of roads. First were the narrow, meandering streets used by pedestrians, farm carts, horses, and bicycles. Developed organically over time, these were places where the common folk and "vagabonds" could swap stories, tales, and experiences (Federici 2004). Second were planned, long-distance, straight roads, some of which dated back to the Roman empire. As Larry Lohmann observes, mixing these two different road systems (e.g. too many donkey carts on paved roads or too many high-speed cars on local roads) can cause a transportation breakdown and defeat the advantages of each (2003:4).

The importance of an organic road system manifests its through colloquial expressions in many languages. In English, the method for



doing something is described as a "way"; one thinks "way" ahead/back; and the most powerful budgetary authority in the United States is called the "Ways and Means Committee" (Adams

2001). Yucatec Maya also employ the concept of roads metaphorically, describing their fate and their work as their “road,” and greeting each other by asking, “How is your road?” (Hanks 1990). In Q’eqchi’, a leader is described as *Aj k’amol b’e*, “the one that brings the way” or “the road bearer” (Adams 2001). To walk means to be “roaded” (the word for road *b’e* converted to a passive verb, *b’EEK*). To wish someone well upon departure, one says “*Timil timil sa’ b’e*.” (Go slowly on the road). Along roads in highland Verapaz, Q’eqchi’ travelers place crosses to demonstrate respect for the mountain gods (*Tzuultaq’a*) nearby. Roads clearly hold cultural meaning for them beyond national economic development (see also Wilk 1984).

For Q’eqchi’ people, the introduction of state roads on top of their network of organic roads, makes their lives better *and* worse. A new road can enable parents to send their children to middle and high school by bus. Roads can also bring improved teacher attendance and also improved access to medical services, especially lowering maternal mortality rates.<sup>14</sup> For rural people, they decrease the costs of simple bureaucratic tasks like acquiring birth certificates or national identification cards from municipal offices. They also afford rural communities a better chance to lobby for basic services like electricity or running water.

As a remote Ixcan villager, Gaspar, commented to another anthropologist, ‘...to walk seven days with a load on your back, yes the road was a relief, but then when you see the consequences one says: “On the one hand it comes to benefit us; but on the other hand it comes to harm us”’ (Manz 2004:88). I found a similar ambivalence about roads among some Q’eqchi’ leaders in my fieldwork. For example, Don Lorenzo Cac was working as a bilingual schoolteacher in an isolated region near Agoutiville, he tried organizing a committee of five surrounding communities to petition for a road. Surprised to encounter resistance against the

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<sup>14</sup> The catastrophic cost of evacuating a critically sick person to a hospital by hiring a private vehicle was frequently cited as a reason for selling land.

road, he discovered that these Q'eqchi' villagers were worried that roads would bring more "castellanos" (Ladinos) who would take their land.

Although it has become a faux pas in the anthropological literature to claim that a community is "isolated" (Kyle 1996), many Q'eqchi' communities are, in fact, purposefully reclusive (even while their agrarian context remains clearly shaped by national and even transnational forces). Q'eqchi' speakers have the highest rate of monolingualism among Guatemala's twenty-two indigenous groups and many actively avoid interpersonal interactions with outsiders. In almost every northern Q'eqchi' community I lived in during fieldwork (2002-04), I was the first foreigner most people had ever seen in person, much less spoken with. Even in villages with comparably better road access, many rarely traveled to the nearest town, if at all.

Visited regularly by traveling salesmen ("Cobaneros") who carry their wares on foot, families can purchase all the basic goods, clothes, and tools from the portal of their homes (Figure 9).

Q'eqchi' migration histories show a clear pattern of secluded settlement (Grandia 2006). As a frontier Q'eqchi' community grows, a small group of families will often split off to establish a nearby settlement (frequently called "the second" as in "La Esperanza II")

accessible only by footpath or horse-trail from the primary village. Migrants to more remote

**Figure 9—A traveling salesman or "cobanero" bringing goods to a remote Q'eqchi' village.**



Source: Grandia 2004

satellite villages typically cite internal conflict, lack of land, or distrust of outsiders as reasons for moving off-road. Historical experience has taught them that while pass-through roads do allow improved access to markets and better prices, they also bring intruders such as:

- “the bad”: cattle ranchers and agribusiness investors who seek to grab smallholder lands;
- “the ugly”: criminals, the police, and the military, who seek to establish control over peoples and territory;
- “the good”: as well as do-gooders (NGO workers, government technicians and bureaucrats, missionaries, and perhaps even an errant anthropologist)

## **“The Bad”: Colonial to Corporate Land Grabs**

Since the colonial period, cattle ranchers have been the primary external actors appropriating Q’eqchi’ land (Grandia 2006). With low labor costs, Extensive ranching is a biologically flexible investment that allows absentee landowners to maintain claim over vast parcels, but vary herd sizes according to cash flow needs. In the Petén colonization process, cattle ranchers received preferential land grants up to 675 hectares each, though this was later reduced to 225 hectares. Smallholders were limited to parcels between 23-90 hectares, with indigenous settlers typically assigned the lower amount (ibid.). Local and national elites took the advantage of their political connections to claim ranches in excess of these policies (Schwartz 1987 and 1995). A common practice was to register land in the names of different kin (wives, daughters, etc.), allowing them to acquire even larger combined estates (Schwartz 2001).

Extensive ranching can be lucrative at large scale, but small to medium ranchers often have thin to negative profit margins. Road access dramatically reduces travel, maintenance, and supervisory costs. Although technically cattle can walk to the nearest road for sale, absentee

ranchers prefer to acquire land alongside waterways and especially roads to facilitate transport to slaughterhouses, but for their own convenience as well. An important part of the lifestyle lure of cattle ranching for absentee landowners is the opportunity to relax and bring visitors to one's "finca" on the weekend. In one village where I lived, the largest cattle owner raised a kind of woolless sheep, pelibueys, for the exclusive purpose of hosting barbeques whenever guests accompanied him on supervisory visits.

Ranchers value roads so highly that they sometimes build their own or pay bribes to get municipal authorities to build roads past their ranches under the guise of other projects. A Petén roadwork administrator confessed that on more than one occasion, "por no conocer el area" (for not knowing the region), they have unwittingly built roads to private cattle ranches because the plan was approved before anyone from his department had an opportunity to inspect the route. His department depends upon municipal contracts, so if a mayor authorizes a private road, then his department cannot object. In other cases, ranchers and loggers initially build their own access roads and then expect the government to assume maintenance. In the tropical lowlands where dirt/gravel roads get washed out on an annual basis, budgets for road maintenance can quickly surpass original construction cost. In theory, the Roads Department is supposed to repair Petén's dirt roads each year, but in practice, this happens only every two to three years. According to the same Petén roads administrator, it costs an average of Q12,000 per kilometer to build a new road, but more than half that (Q6,563) to rehabilitate and repair existing roads.<sup>15</sup>

With improved road access, pasture can be converted into more profitable agribusinesses. Some ranchers are entering nascent markets like papaya exports; a few are reforestation with energetic tree species to capture carbon credits; and others want to diversify into agro fuels.

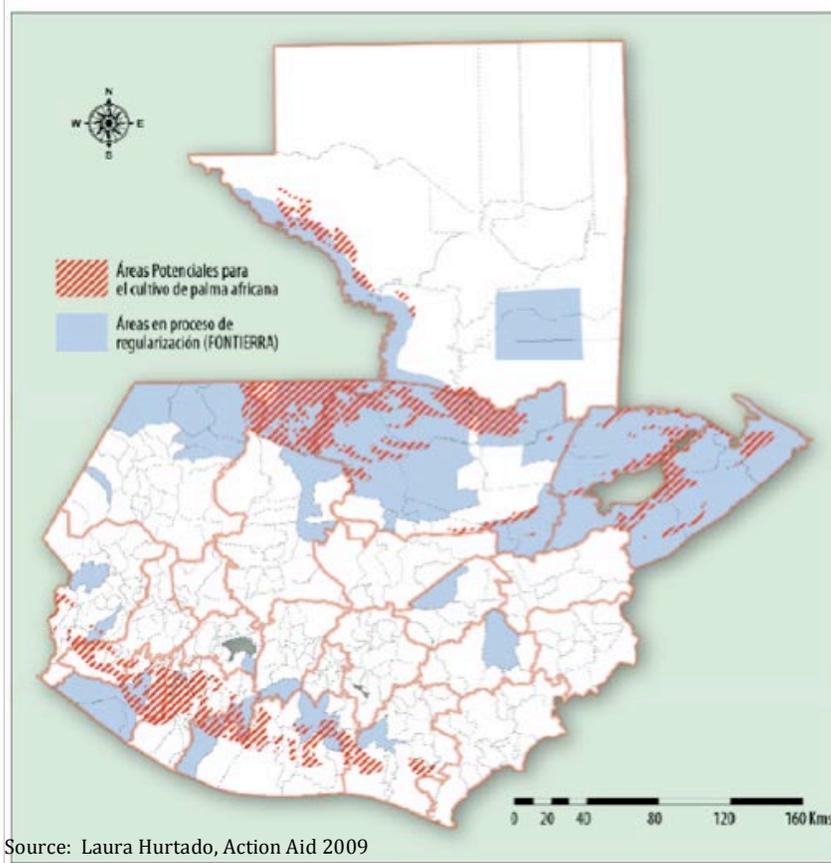
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<sup>15</sup> Schwartz (1990) gives average costs of road construction at Q3,000-Q4,000 per kilometer between 1974 and 1984; maintenance averaged Q1,845 for roads and Q594 for trails in that same time period (Q1 was equivalent to US\$1 then).

While cattle ranching was primarily culpable for smallholder dispossession in the first three decades of frontier colonization, African-palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) plantations, and, to a lesser degree, sugar cane cultivation have dramatically accelerated smallholder dispossession in the second half of the 2000s (Hurtado 2009). A trade union of a half dozen palm companies recently reported having invested \$32 million in land purchases of approximately 60,000 hectares (Alonso, Alonzo, and Dürr 2008). Another respected Guatemalan economist believes the figure could already be as high as 75,000, perhaps reaching 100,000 to 120,000 hectares within the next six years (L. Solano, pers. comm., 5/7/2011). Along with a half million dollar loan from the IDB under the “sustainable energy” component of the PPP (Solano 2008), African-palm companies have received financing from a private Colombian company, Green Earth Fuels (with backing from the Carlyle Group and Goldman Sachs), as well as public-sector loans from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) (Hurtado 2008). Several of them have applied for over \$6 million of annual carbon credits through the Clean Development Mechanism to fuel their peasant land purchases and other investments (Alonso, Alonzo, and Dürr 2008).

Almost all the palm plantations are located on what was once agricultural land farmed by lowland Q’eqchi’ smallholders in regions targeted by the World Bank for cadastral measurement (Figure 10). Some of these ownership transfers are technically twenty-five year leases, even if communities were ever able to regain control, the soils will be highly degraded. Although some communities have been cheated out of their land for as little as \$60-\$85 a hectare (La Otra Cooperativa 2009), most have been offered \$300/hectare for parcels only accessible by foot and up to \$600/hectare for those alongside existing roads (Solano 2008).

Figure 10: Areas suited for African palm cultivation compare with regions targeted for land administration projects



In a recent documentary film, one witness explains, “I am one of the deceived, one who was convinced to sell my land. The owners of the African palm company told us that they would buy our land and then we could ask for another piece of land.” Others were falsely led to believe they would have permanent employment on the palm plantations. As another explains: “There is work in palm companies, this is true, but they do not pay fair wages. In the beginning they did, and then they stopped. One week we are paid, the next one we are not” (ProPetén 2009).

While the wholesale purchase of entire villages by agrofuel companies has rightly captivated the attention of critics, the steady expansion of the cattle ranching economy is

arguably still more responsible for overall smallholder dispossession.<sup>16</sup> Whether to palm or cattle, smallholders sell their land for similar reasons. Sometimes they are coerced to do so by military officers or drug traffickers, who use large landholdings as a cover for landing strips or, in border regions, as a cover for smuggling. Other times, peasants sell land regretfully to solve a financial crisis (a failed crop, an illness in the family, or family conflict) or optimistically in the hope of finding another parcel farther north along the frontier. Facing diminishing terms of trade for corn commodity production<sup>17</sup>, other farmers sell strategically hoping to start a small business (e.g., a dry goods store), to pay for a child's high school education and acquire a stable, salaried income for the family, or to pay a *coyote* to go to the United States in search of work.<sup>18</sup> While an exceptional few are thereby able to exit farming<sup>19</sup>, most of the newly landless continue to depend upon swidden agriculture for their livelihood. With no more public land available for settler claims, they do so by either squatting in protected areas or by renting or sharecropping parcels from large landholders in their midst.

While soil quality is of relatively greater concern for palm planters than for cattle ranchers, they also seek to establish plantations with access to roads that will support heavy truck travel to their processing plants. The associated deterioration of local roads has led to conflicts with nearby communities and municipalities that must pay for their repair (L. Hurtado, pers. comm. 2/28/11; La Otra Cooperativa 2009). Multiple field reports indicate that some of the

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<sup>16</sup> In some ways ranchers are at odds with palm companies, because the latter offer (but do not always pay) comparably higher salaries to workers, thereby driving up labor rates in the region.

<sup>17</sup> Lowland Q'eqchi' farmers produce an estimated one fifth of Guatemala's corn. Although consumer corn prices have risen dramatically in recent years, the amount paid to producers at the farm-gate has stagnated (Gauster 2008). Farmer profit margins will likely become even more fragile as corn imports permitted under the DR-CAFTA begin to flood the Central American market (Grandia 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Although emigration to the United States was unheard of in lowland Q'eqchi' communities even just a few years ago, a rising number of young men are making the trek northward.

<sup>19</sup> Only a limited number become rural wage workers because cattle ranches and palm plantations employ so few people. Palm oil requires only 94 labor days and cattle ranching much less per hectare once pastures are established, compared to 284 labor days generated by vegetable cultivation or 206-40 for basic grains (Alonso, Alonza, and Dürr 2008; conversions mine).

palm companies block intra-village roads or access to the closest highway, charging villagers \$1-2 to pass through the plantation. Reminiscent of military controls during the civil war, some palm company security demand identification cards from farmers trying to commute to their parcels. As this farmer testified in Sayaxché:

When I want to go to my land, they don't let me; I have to ask permission to harvest my corn or take out firewood or construction wood. I have to give accounts of what I take. This is what the company has done. They made it private property and planted palm on both sides of the road and don't let anyone pass anymore. The security guards inspect what I carry in my bag when I go to my field in the morning; they write down my name and my identification number and they repeat this in the afternoon, too. (La Otra Cooperativa 2009: 22)

Indeed, as we shall see in the next section, roads and other PPP infrastructure may help facilitate the re-paramilitarization of the Guatemalan countryside.

## **“The Ugly”: Securitization and State Surveillance**

Like the spaces (prisons, hospitals) of organized repression that Michel Foucault so famously depicted, roads also bring with them disciplinary effects. As an Ixcán villager, Miguel Reyes, observed during the civil war: ‘Always when there is an access road, this facilitates the army to corner people.’ Today roads subsume rural people to more distant corporate power via proxy enforcement by national authorities who work to provide a stable investment climate.

As Ivan Illich (1983) argues, public spaces enclosed for infrastructure projects are converted into property that then must be defended by political authorities. Lewis Mumford also presciently observed how certain energy technologies like nuclear power might become a Trojan horse for new forms of social control and ‘undermine democracy by their fostering of secrecy by and within the state’ (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997:194). Building on insights from Amory Lovins, Laura Nader (1995) similarly suggests that “hard” technologies require standardization and, therefore, lend themselves to reliance on experts and centralized planning.

Recognizing the links between infrastructure and the future of democracy, populist and progressive movements have astutely targeted the seizure of roads as a method of protest. Through mass mobilizations, peasant organizations regularly block rural highways and frequently shut down traffic in the capital. Yet, as the Mexican and Central American economies become more deeply interlinked under the PPP, the stakes rise for keeping open borders, roads, ports, and airfields. Guatemalan President Berger, in fact, told CNN shortly before military/police attacked indigenous protestors during a 2005 conflict with Glamis Gold mining company: ‘We have to protect the investors.’ Since 2003, the Guatemalan Congress has considered several new laws that would double the jail time for land occupations and treat protests against infrastructure as terrorist acts (UDEFEUGUA 2008). Although these first legislative attempts at criminalizing social movements proved unsuccessful, they remain in the realm of the politically imaginable.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly in Guatemala, there is historical precedent for fears about military repression to protect large infrastructure. Perhaps the most egregious example from the 1980s were a series of military-led massacres of Achí Maya people in the Chixoy River basin who refused to be relocated for the construction of the World Bank- and IDB-funded Chixoy hydroelectric dam (Johnston 2005; Aguilera 1979; Elton 2004). While these massacres appear to have been directly ordered by the state to quell villagers’ opposition to the dams, in other cases, the alignment of business interests with the military was more subtle. When asked if the coffee planters had bribed the military to control troublesome workers during the civil war, one of the largest plantation owners in Alta Verapaz, Edgar Champney said, ‘Maybe some did, but it wasn’t

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<sup>20</sup> After all, the CIA overthrew the Guatemalan government five decades ago over a perceived threat to cheap bananas.

common. There was no need because the alliances were natural, the army was on the side of the powerful. So money, no, but a bottle of whiskey, a woman, yes' (Grandin 2004:116).

Another clear “bottle of whiskey” the state provides for business is a legible property system. Starting in the 1980s, USAID helped Guatemala establish a “land bank” project to sell, rather than redistribute, land to peasant groups. With support from other international donors, after the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, Guatemala completed the shift from a state-led model of land governance to market-assisted land reform. The World Bank has had a particularly influential role in this process, having lent the government \$93 million since 1998 for two land administration projects in northern Guatemala encompassing all three departments of Q’eqchi’ settlement (Petén, Alta Verapaz, Izabal), but also a critical region for transnational infrastructure development under the PPP.<sup>21</sup> Although the first project carried out in Petén ostensibly was to help smallholders title their land, very few completed the legalization process and the second phase of the project in an additional seven departments was reduced to cadastral measurement.

As documented by myself (Grandia 2009) and others (Gould 2010; Ybarra 2010), the first project led to rampant land speculation and smallholder dispossession across Petén, especially among Q’eqchi’ communities. Anticipating the rapidly rising curve of land values—especially along roads—cattle ranchers and palm planters purchased peasant farms at sometimes less than ten percent what land prices would reach after titling was complete. Narco-ranchers were rumored somehow to have acquired cadastral maps from the land administration project. As one witness from a Q’eqchi’ community that lost its land to a palm plantation testified, “Because of the Cadastral Registry, it was easier to manipulate us into selling our land to the

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<sup>21</sup> The second project also includes Chiquimula, Escuintla, Sacatepequez, and Zacapa, and the municipality of Palachum in the Department of Quiche, but the primary focus will be on the Q’eqchi’ heartland of Alta Verapaz, known for having the highest rate of land conflicts in the country.

wealthy. Now we, the inhabitants of El Rosalito village, are sad; our children and grandchildren don't have land" (ProPetén 2009:Interview 3). Said another: "When [the technicians] arrived, they said to us: 'You are going to be better off when your land has been measured. The land will be yours.' So they did; you can't say otherwise. And now? Was it just so we would sell it? Now we are in trouble because of it" (ibid.:Interview 4).

Hard data on land concentration in Petén remains elusive because the new owners do not necessarily notify the National Property Registry office of their purchase, nor does the Guatemalan government provide researchers unlimited access to land records. A sample study by the Catholic Church (La Otra Cooperativa 2009) and my own estimate based on two years of ethnographic research would put land sales at 15-25 percent of project beneficiaries immediately following cadastral measurement. Dispossession need not have been the necessary consequence of this World Bank project. As I have argued elsewhere (Grandia 2009), it suffered from an excessive technical focus on the minutia of mapping, failed to educate project beneficiaries about property inheritance procedures, glossed over historical inequities of land distribution, disregarded the agro-ecological conditions needed for swidden cropping, overlooked indigenous customary land management practices, and ignored more general needs for integrated agrarian development in Petén. In other words, project personnel were more focused on making the cadastral process legible to outsiders than helping rural people whose lands were being mapped understand the value of their land (cf. Scott 1998). The project was also troubled by the flawed assumption that economic growth flows from *things* (in this case, property titles) rather *social relations* (e.g. civic processes that might establish zoning laws to support sustainable development and protect smallholders from speculation), as discussed further below.

## **“The Good”: Projectization**

Aside from increased state/military repression and land concentration, PPP roads and other infrastructure projects may threaten civic life in other ways. As John Perkins’s (2004) *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (2004) reveals, U.S. intelligence agencies had a plan to purposively indebt Third World nations with pointless infrastructure projects so as to be able later to demand military favors and/or trade privileges upon loan default. Working for international development agencies around the world, Perkins and other economic hit men (who referred to themselves as EHMs) helped train a whole generation of do-gooders to believe in the necessity of big infrastructure projects for progress.

Originally designed to rebuild war-torn Europe after World War II, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (a.k.a the World Bank) shifted its focus to restoring colonial infrastructure to the Third World (Goldman 2004). Much of the World Bank’s expansion under Robert McNamara’s leadership from an annual budget of \$953 million in 1968 to \$12.4 billion in 1981 was through high modernist infrastructure projects financed by loans that realistically could never be repaid. When Third World countries began in the 1980s to default on this debt, the International Monetary Fund imposed structural adjustment policies (SAPs) which forced countries to privatize resources and promote exports over local food security (Danaher 1994). As we have seen in Guatemala’s history of the coffee trade, export businesses demand externally-oriented, “pass-through” infrastructure, precipitating a vicious cycle in which a country applies for another development bank project, thereby falling ever deeper into debt.

This international history profoundly shaped what we know today as the “project cycle,” defined by the World Bank in six top-down steps (identification, preparation, appraisal, negotiations, implementation/supervision, and evaluation) that emphasize desk-work and give

short-shrift to the bottom-up processes necessary for catalyzing lasting social change. While infrastructure projects might fit easily the “logical framework” required by most funding agencies today, development organizations struggle to contort other types of projects into this planning tool. In turn, this subtly steers development projects towards short-term interventions rather than long-term processes of engagement, advocacy, and civic spirit necessary to reach the poorest of the poor.

In a rare example outside the mold, old friend and the director of a regional environmental organization, Elena Chi, was alarmed about the consequences of land concentration in Petén and broke out of her typical “project” mode to produce a documentary film about the impacts of African palm on Q’eqchi’ smallholders. She secured a small grant, but it was not enough to cover salaries or even the cost of printing the DVDs. A few members of her own staff and partner organizations agreed to invest their free time into what she renamed a “philanthropic” effort. Others disappointed her by refusing to participate without compensation. Undeterred, she found other collaborators to join in her “stone soup” effort and the film evolved into something more daring and impactful than what salaried workers worried about job security might have produced.

Alas, this type of social media work and political advocacy is rarely included in NGO project portfolios, which typically favor more staid activities like workshops, training sessions, and meetings that are “legible” to donors. Likewise, rural communities in Petén tend request conventional projects they perceive they can get easily from donors and politicians—e.g., roads, clinics, schools, community buildings—rather than civic mobilization to address root causes of poverty like unfair terms of trade or low rural wages.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the PPP presumes that

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<sup>22</sup> The PAN, Guatemala’s leading political party for many years, promised “Obras, no Palabras” (Works not Words) on campaign materials and billboards.

underdevelopment stems from a lack of technical, infrastructure, and capital—rather than centuries of land and resource inequity, institutionalized racism, and other more pressing social problems at the grassroots.

While many development exports might scoff at Reagonomics (the idea that if you give tax breaks to the wealthy, this money will somehow trickle down and improve life for the poor), a similar fallacy is at work in the PPP and in modernization projects more generally—what we might call “infrastructuromics.” By this, I mean the false assumption that if you build something, development will magically exude from the cement. As the annual report of the Guatemalan roads department grandiosely claims, “To mention the word “road,” we soon think of well-being and progress. Every nation in the world cements its economic, political and social structure into its highways” (Caminos Vial 7).

In contrast to such grand rhetoric, the afterlife of many infrastructure projects proves disappointing, because insufficient thought was given to the “trickle”—in other words, their intended usage. How many schools have been built without parallel budgeting for new teachers? Or clinics built without nurses or medicines? Or ecotourism lodges built without teaching people the skills to run them? Or feeder roads built without establishing information systems to help farmers get better prices at market?

Closer to home, the Obama stimulus plan likewise prioritized projects that were “shovel” ready, but not necessarily stimulating to long-term employment rates. Before winter descended upon New England, construction crews worked furiously to dig up and rebuild city roads where I live in Worcester, Massachusetts. While maintenance of the nation’s roadways and public transportation infrastructure have been indisputably neglected over the past few dates, it is not

clear how such a seasonal flurry of road repair and construction would provide the kind of long-term employment for deep economic recovery for post-industrial cities like mine.

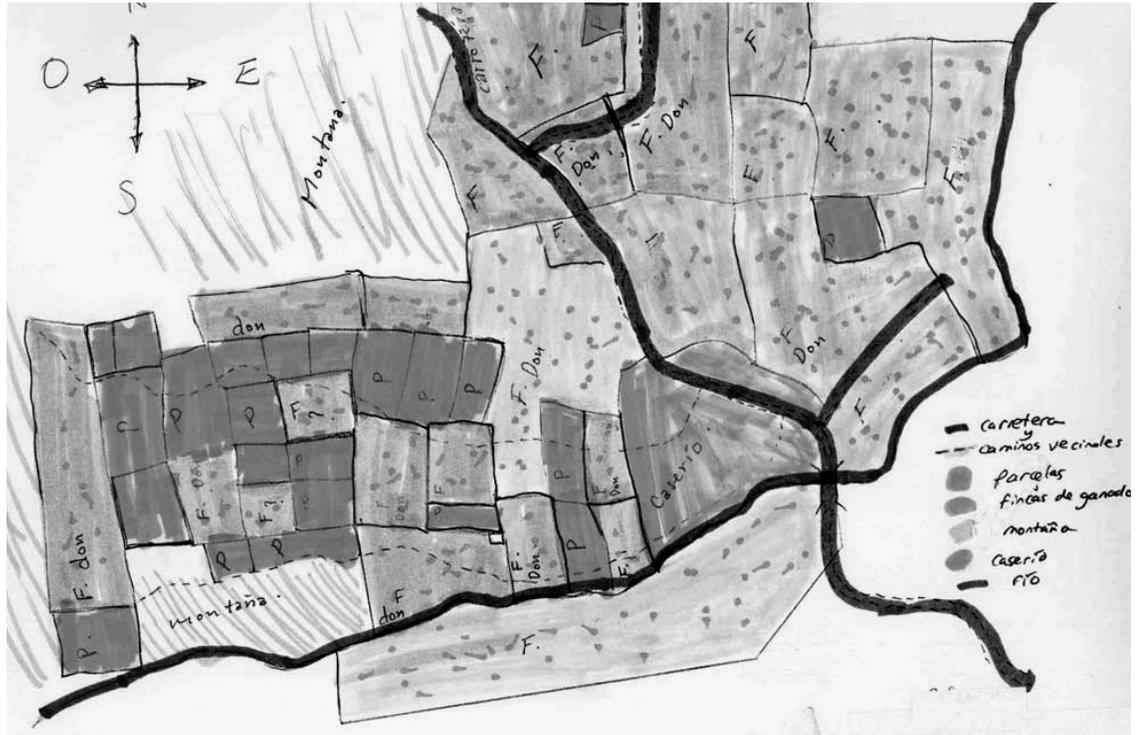
## Sehalaw

The experience of Sehalaw, a Q'eqchi' village in rural Livingston, Izabal, is illustrative of many of the hidden problems that enter communities via roads. Settled by foot a century ago along trails extending from Alta Verapaz, Sehalaw farmers once managed their land collectively through customary law.<sup>23</sup> The government colonization program (INTA) in the 1970s originally awarded Sehalaw its land as a “collective agrarian patrimony”—meaning that the government only measured the village boundaries and left internal land distribution to the village’s discretion, mostly because individual land titling was unfeasible with the remote location of the village. However, in the mid 1970s, a road was constructed through Sehalaw that connected farther west with the Franja Transversal highway and its associated oil pipeline. Road access brought them renewed attention from colonization officials who called a meeting to recommend that the village privatize its land. At the height of the civil war, communities dared not risk going against a government suggestions. Shortly thereafter, the government paved the highway to Guatemala City ten kilometers away and improved the feeder road to the village. These road projects brought both poor Ladino settlers (who were either already or aspiring small cattle owners themselves) and investment ranchers to the area. Parcel by parcel they began buying up Q'eqchi' land. In less than a decade, nine ranchers had acquired more than seventy percent of the village—including all the prime land near the roadside, close to the village and along the river, as illustrated by Figure 11 drawn by a local leader.

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<sup>23</sup> Rancher José Díaz described the customary Q'eqchi' system of agriculture in Sehalaw as “economically backward...like Cuban communists!”

**Figure 11—Cattle takeover of Sehallow village**



**Note on this black and white conversion from a color map:** Parcels are marked by “P” and cattle ranches by “F” in the lighter, dotted shade. The SW to NE line is a river and the SE to NW line is a road. The village settlement is the large area where these cross.

The 1990s brought charities to the region. For a time, Christian Children’s Fund provided scholarships to schoolchildren in the form of a monthly stipend (about \$8 a month) from North American “patrons” (padrinos) who also sent them letters in English that families dug up years later for me to translate. When the project phased out in 2003, many parents were left with heightened hopes of educating their children but little means to do so. Many asked if I knew of another “proyecto” to help their children.

Although other anthropologists point to the training of young catechists via Catholic Action in the 1970s as having undermined the authority of village elders in highland Verapaz

(e.g. Wilson 1993), the later influx of secular NGOs was equally, if not more transformative of leadership structures in Sehalaw and other villages in this region. Still governed by elders in spiritual matters, the village organized complex, multi-day ceremonies and religious pilgrimages at least twice a year. I marveled at the logistical prowess required for these events – feeding no less than five hundred people several meals from the slaughter of one steer, along with the hiring of musicians, the careful preparation of other special ritual food offerings, and the expensive acquisition of incense and fireworks. They also organized a complex system of labor contributions to maintain to acquire and maintain new services like water and electricity and had an active parent-teachers association. Albeit highly skilled at civic organization, leaders spoke wistfully about learning to write a formal project proposal as a magical release from poverty.

## Conclusion — Towards a Slow Infrastructure Movement

To clarify, my argument is not against roads, per se. Having suffered many interminable bus-rides and inopportune flat tires in my own travels during seven years of ethnographic fieldwork across northern Guatemala, I can appreciate the comforts afforded by road improvements. Yet, given the hundreds of millions to be invested in highways through the PPP, a proper cost-benefit analysis must not only evaluate the qualitative consequences of building a paved pass-through highway, but also what alternative infrastructure might be created with those same public funds. In doing so, planners might find that twenty improved, “organic” feeder roads might stimulate the Mesoamerican economy more than twenty kilometers of “synthetic” blacktop. While a call for “slower” roads may seem counter-intuitive for development, we might look to the surprising success of the “slow food” movement for inspiration.

Although theories about local-international connections and “capitalist penetration” are fashionable in the academic literature today, the speed and quality of these connections is less discussed (Kyle 1996; Dalakogou 2010). Yet, as political economist Karl Polanyi once noted, the tempo of capitalist expansion is critical for democracy. “Why should the ultimate victory of a trend,” he asked, “be taken as proof of the ineffectiveness of the efforts to slow down its progress?” (1944:36). Freedom, he argued, would depend upon the ability of a nation to re-embed the “self-regulating market” through social protections faster than it might otherwise hurtle towards totalitarianism. Likewise, the slower development of roads would allow more time and space for public participation in landscape planning and zoning to protect smallholders from dispossession and help local businesses adjust to the change.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, public infrastructure is vital to the life of any community. When aptly designed by/for local users, it can be a powerful force of change. Imagine if the Guatemalan government took just a fraction of the money it will borrow (plus the money it will eventually pay in interest on those loans) for PPP highways and other transnational-oriented infrastructure that facilitate the movement of capital *through* places and, instead, invested in organic roads or other smaller, strategic and perhaps “slower” projects that could help money reverberate in the regional economy, such as:

- An office complex with low rents that civil society and grassroots groups might borrow on an ad-hoc basis, as the costs of establishing independent offices (getting phone lines, internet access, security) can be prohibitively expensive.

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<sup>24</sup> Having noted that some local diners in southern Petén along the newly paved from Flores to Guatemala City had lost business since traffic passed through more quickly, the late director of a regional environmental organization began stopping to eat lunch early on trips to the capital (or wanted to have a very late dinner on his return trip). Although this annoyed some of his staff, he was fiercely loyal to Petén and insisted upon contributing to the local economy instead of a corporate-owned cafeteria at a highway rest stop in Izabal.

- Storage silos for basic grains (corn, beans) to level out prices during times of scarcity, (cf. Bunch 1982).
- An extension of the central and municipal markets where local small producers could rent stalls on a daily basis to sell their foodstuffs directly to consumers in a rotating farmers' market.
- A nursery and training complex to support more fully the excellent INAB reforestation incentive program for small farmers.
- A seed bank for farmers to preserve and share local and heirloom varieties.
- A public library/archive for the growing student population in the region that could be connected to a network of rotating tin-trunk rural libraries.
- A regional museum for displaying locally discovered or repatriated archaeological pieces that would serve as a secondary attraction to Tikal (and therefore encourage tourists to stay longer than the regular day tours from the capital).
- A small air-conditioned warehouse to store medicines from the government pharmacy program and from foreign donors to redistribute to village clinics through grassroots health promoters and midwives.
- Municipal birth centers that might be used by trained midwives to avoid sending women to the overburdened regional hospital where the doctors perform C-sections just because they are impatient for a lunch break.
- A public meeting hall for conferences that are otherwise held in expensive hotels.
- Training centers to help stimulate non-agricultural rural livelihoods (repair shops, stores, pharmacies, crafts, etc.) and prevent the unilateral cash flow from rural to urban areas.
- An inexpensive, public boarding house to allow rural students to attend high school and/or college in town.

- An internet site to help the many development organizations in the region better coordinate their efforts and avoid overlap or, worse, competition among themselves.

These are but a few examples of infrastructure needed I have heard expressed by grassroots and civil society groups in Petén that also might help money linger locally. With proper public consultation, more ideas for local, living infrastructure might attract project funding or civic spirit.

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