



**Contemporary land grab-driven agrarian change
from a multiple politics perspective**
Insights from Guatemala

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Contemporary land grab-driven agrarian change from a multiple politics perspective: Insights from Guatemala

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Abstract

Changing land access and control relations due to sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses land grabbing since the mid-2000s are a vector and an expression of a distinct and dominant extractivist accumulation and governmental project in Guatemala. State and social forces pushing for this project create and reproduce consenting subjects in their struggle for hegemony. But through expected and unexpected outcomes of both, success and failure in their original plans, they also constitute (new) rejections of particular forms of being exploited, oppressed or governed more broadly. Such unfavorably changing land access and control relations are a source of multiple grievances among Maya-Q'eqchi' lowlanders catalyzing the latter's unrest into concrete practices of resistance framed from below as "defense of territory". Their repertoire of contention includes 'everyday' and more militant forms of contention which are increasingly deployed as part of strategic litigations processes. For this, alliances are forged under problematic terms with national rural social movements, other social actors and even some state actors. Dominant extractivist state and social actors in contention, on their part, frame their governable space-making efforts as "developmental" and "ecologically and socially responsible", employing a repertoire based on "divide and win" and "rule of law" strategies articulated through discursive, regulatory and violent mechanisms. Indeed, land grab-driven agrarian change has triggered a new cycle of contention in Maya-Q'eqchi' populated northern lowlands. However, its outcomes are not a story foretold, but the becoming products of dynamic, multiple and polifaceted politics between, across and within diverse state and social actors in contention at different scales and places.

Keywords: land resources control-grabs, contemporary extractivist political economy, government rationality, governable spaces, social differentiation, defense of territory, rural social movements, Guatemala.

About the Author

Alberto Alonso-Fradejas is a PhD Candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies (fradejas@iss.nl). This paper draws on in his research on the political economy, ecology and sociology of agrarian change and territorial restructuring in Guatemala and Central America since the early 2000s as Head of the Land and Territory Research area of the Guatemalan Institute of Agrarian and Rural Studies. Elaborating on the Guatemalan case, his current research investigates the nature and character of multiple and polifaceted powers involved in material, cultural and political dynamics of change in land resources access and control relations and the ways these powers, as embodied in practices of state and social actors, shape the terms in which domination and hegemony are constituted, reproduced and contested within contemporary processes of agrarian change and territorial restructuring.

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1 Introduction

Within the variegated political trend of ‘financialization’ of the world economy (Fine 2012) contemporary narratives on convergent economic, energy, environmental and food crises have laid a fertile ground for food, feedstocks, agrofuels, timber, minerals, oil and biomass complexes to (re)gain momentum as ‘global hubs of capital accumulation’ (Borras et al. 2012). Growing demand for natural resource-based commodities has prompted unevenly, though across North and South, rural and urban milieus, a wide range of corporate deals over land resources. Such is the case in Guatemala from the mid-2000s onwards where this world dynamic has reinvigorated, under a new extractivist rationality, the historical continuum of oligarchic control over nature and (rural) population. A domestic oligarchy-controlled mix of agrarian, financial and industrial corporations, occasionally allied with transnational financiers (Alonso-Fradejas 2012), have been aggressively ‘grabbing control’ (Borras et al. 2012: 851) over land, water and other natural resources (hereinafter ‘land resources’) for sugarcane and oil palm plantations. These converge with a series of (re)newed land resource control-grabs in the fields of mining, oil extraction, fast-growing tree plantations, carbon trading, hydro-power generation, cattle ranching, mass-tourism and even to launder drug-trafficking moneys. These come together with mushrooming environmental enclosures since the early 1990s, and with actual and foreseen economic and logistical corridors, to constitute overwhelming forces restructuring rural territories.¹

Specifically, sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses’ operational logic in Guatemala includes, first, the ‘temporal deferment’ of their investment (Harvey 2003). That is, allocating current high revenues to expensive and long-term endowments (including land, mills and distilleries) which deeply reshape territorial forms of agrarian production. Beyond their particular technological expressions such forms of production are approached here as the ideas and practices embedded in land social relations and condensed in former and emerging ‘labor regimes.’² Second, agribusinesses’ expansion relies on the making of new governable spaces to accommodate their investment. As argued by Rose, ‘governing does not just act on a pre-existing thought world with its natural divisions [rather] to govern is to cut experience in certain ways, to bring new facets and forces, new intensities and relations into being’ (1999:31, in Gregory et. al 2009: 312). This involves questioning the implications of clashing or overlapping rationalities and mechanisms of governing land social relations at different scales³ and places.⁴ That is, understanding influences from changing world politico-economic conditions over ideas, discourses and practices of different state and social actors (inter)acting in the government of land resources at national, territorial and community levels. This inquiry assumes the interdependency of state and social powers and the mutual constitution of their material and ideational forms and nature, as elaborated by authors like Gramsci (1971), Poulantzas (2000), Jessop (2007), Foucault (1991), Fox (1993) and Li (2007).

In his particular analytics of statehood Foucault developed the concept of ‘government rationality’ (1991) to ‘capture the *intertwinement of forms of reflection* about government and the *practices of*

¹ Understood here as ‘spatial assemblages of power relations and identity strategies [signifying] the ‘bottom-up’ spatial contexts for identity and cultural difference (or place) more than the ‘top-down’ connections between state and territory’ (Gregory et. al 2009: 745-746).

² ‘Specific methods of mobilizing labor and organizing it in production, and their particular social, economic and political conditions’ (Bernstein 1988: 31-32 in White et al. 2012: 622).

³ Scale ‘comprises the nested (and sometimes not so nested) hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size’ (Jessop 2007: 104,105).

⁴ Place will be broadly understood as a ‘unit of space that has discrete boundaries, shared internal characteristics, and that changes over time and interacts with other similar units’ (Gregory et al. 2009: 539).

governing' (ibid. stress added). Government⁵ is then potentially exercised by and over state and social actors, ideas and things. It entails an array of *mechanisms* of different nature 'involved in the governance of conduct and, a fortiori, in the production of hegemony' (Jessop 2010: 342). These are mechanisms through which 'subjects have been produced in historically variable ways according to particular political rationalities' (Biebricher and Vogelmann 2012). They are not only ideas, however, they are also concrete practices of different state and social actors originated in 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power' (Foucault 1991: 102). As such, development practices like extractivism can be productively understood as forms of government (Watts 2003: 12). State and social forces embodying dominant accumulation interests and political rationalities of government create and reproduce consenting subjects in their struggle for hegemony. But through expected and unexpected outcomes of both, success and failure in their original plans, they also constitute (new) rejections of particular forms of being exploited, oppressed or governed more broadly (Scott 1985, Foucault 1991, Fox 1993, Watts 2003, Jessop 2007, Li 2007, Edelman 1999, Peluso and Lund 2011).

Main territories of expansion of sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses since the mid-2000s are in the so-called Guatemalan northern lowlands, mainly populated by Maya-Q'eqchi' peoples (hereinafter Q'eqchi'). Elaborating on research in the area since 2006,⁶ I will argue that contemporary land grab-driven agrarian change has effectively catalyzed a new 'cycle of contention' (Tarrow 1998, 2012).⁷ Different theories on social power or engaging with power constitution, reproduction and resistance provide alternative analytical frameworks. The inherently conflictual nature of class relations is central from a Marxist perspective since 'a regime of accumulation based on exploitation is characterized by conflict, resistance and struggle' (O'Laughlin 2013: 179). Scott (1985) argued that even when acquiescence to exploitation and other forms of subordination seems apparent, domination is still contested through covert everyday forms of resistance. And also for Foucault resistance is inherent to power relations; his analysis of government rationalities 'is inseparable from the analysis of corresponding forms of resistance, or 'counter-conducts'' (Senellart, in Foucault 2007: 326).

Notwithstanding, I have tried to bridge structural and process-based approaches to give a more grounded account of multiple but concrete politics currently shaping domination and resistance to dominant accumulation interests and political rationalities of government in the Guatemalan countryside. Not much credit can be claimed by my main arguments in this essay, namely that outcomes of contemporary land grab-driven agrarian change are not a story foretold but the

⁵ Arguably Foucault's notion of *government* rationalities has greater explanatory power to address how rationalities and mechanisms of governing land resources are constituted, reproduced and contested than alternative accounts such as those on *governance*. In this regard, the (heterogeneous) governance school is considered to suffer from a major ontological problem since 'even if we take into account that many governance scholars are interested in the *interplay* between formal and informal arrangements etc., the point remains that their *implicit baseline* often enough is still the conventional hierarchically organized *state neatly separated from society* (government) against which *networks are defined as cutting across this separation* and thus *constituting forms of governance*' (Biebricher and Vogelmann 2012, stress added).

⁶ Research methods include geographic information system analysis, documentary sources review, individual and group interviews, participatory observation and a gender differentiated household survey conducted in October 2010. The survey's sample was stratified by village (significance level 5%) and included 294 randomly selected households (586 surveys) from twenty communities (hamlets) in six villages of the northern lowlands (see Figure 1 below).

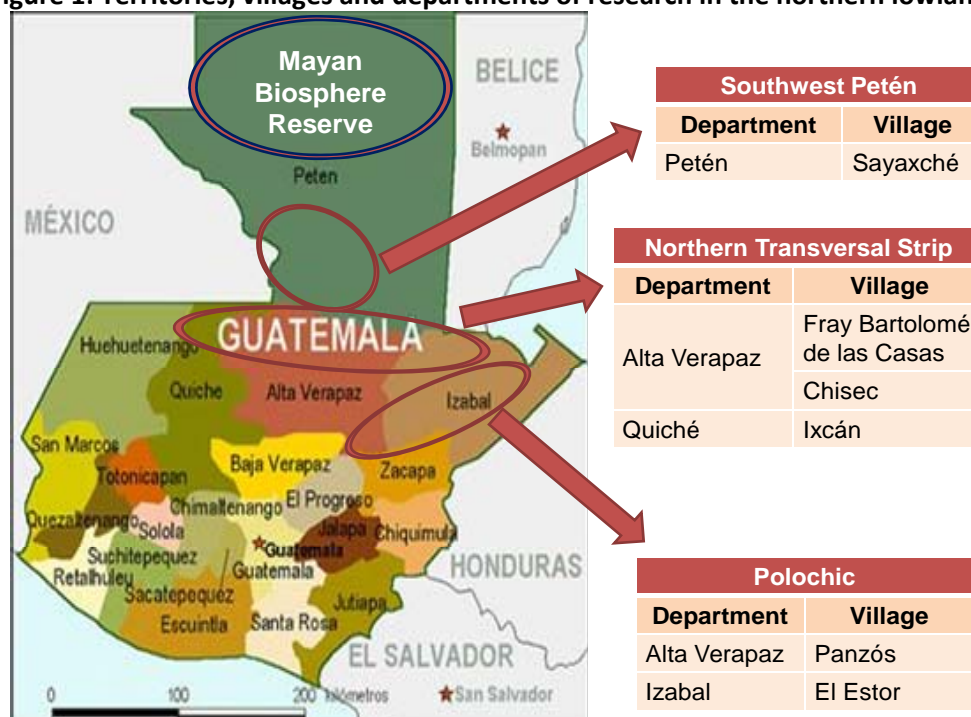
⁷ Understood by Tarrow as 'less momentous than revolutions, more connected than contingent chains of events' (2012: 215).

product of multiple and polifaceted politics at different scales and places. However, no assessment⁸ of current political dynamics of agrarian change in Guatemala I have had the opportunity to review engages with whose, why and how dissent/unrest turns into a practice of resistance to dominant directions of change in land resource access and control relations. In so doing, my analysis will navigate from more to less obvious and/or overarching politics involving multiple state and social actors at different scales and places. That is, in other words, to navigate the *politics within the politics* of ideological, material and political domination and hegemony, resistance and counter-hegemony. This entails accounting for the politics *between* broadly defined, historically antagonistic and discursively essentialized contending life projects (i.e., “new extractivism” vs. “non-extractivist others”) as well as for the politics *across* their constituency and the politics *within* specific state and social actors.

2 Land grabbing as a source of grievances among Q’eqchi’ lowlanders

The Guatemalan northern lowlands encompass almost half of Guatemala’s national territory. It is here that the (1.6 million-hectare) *Mayan Biosphere Reserve*, a protected area delimiting the legal boundaries of the national agrarian frontier, co-exists with the country’s core of indigenous cultivators supplying Guatemalan and Central American food markets, traditional coffee estates and cattle ranches and recent sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses. As aforementioned, this essay elaborates on recent and historical evidence gathered in a series of communities from six villages in three distinct territories in the northern lowlands, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Territories, villages and departments of research in the northern lowlands



Source: Author’s elaboration based on Government of Guatemala 2009. Scale: 1:3,000,000.

⁸ There is a prolific and very rich literature on collective action and social movements in Guatemala. Most of it, however, covers a time span ranging from colonialism to the early 2000s at the latest and/or account for current dynamics of contention either in other areas of the country or around other issues. See, among others, Falla (1995), Cojtí Cuxil (1997), Biekart (1999), Bastos and Camus (1996, 2003), Hale (2004, 2006), Brett (2006), Macleod Howland (2008), Edelman (2008), Velásquez Nimatuj (2008), Ba Tiul (2010), Sandoval (2011), and Yagenova (2012).

The three territories share tropical climate conditions at an altitude below 500 meters above sea level, though the Polochic entails a valley area (carved by the Polochic River) surrounded by two mountain formations. There are, however, significant differences in the historical constitution of these territories. Briefly and broadly, two distinctive historical processes of territorialization characterized the Polochic, on one side, and Southwest Petén and the lowlands of Northern Transversal Strip, on the other. The Polochic valley lands were first granted (or cheaply allocated) by liberal governments from the 1870s onwards to German settlers and “white” Guatemalan oligarchs and government cronies who established large coffee estates. Together with the land, Q’eqchi’ families inhabiting the area were “allocated” to the new settlers and became semi-slave labor under the *colonato*⁹ labor regime. Throughout the twentieth century the hilly lands surrounding the valley were populated by families who were expelled or fled from the haciendas. Agrarian colonization of the rainforests of Southwest Petén and the Northern Transversal Strip was sponsored by former military regimes in compliance with the counter-revolutionary land policies mushrooming in Latin America after the 1961 Alliance for Progress Initiative. Since then, thousands of (near) landless families from all over the country arrived in these two territories in search of farmland. Most distinctively many groups of Q’eqchi’ families settled there escaping the exploitative *colonato* labor regime (e.g. from the Polochic) and/or the genocidal violence of the internal armed conflict.¹⁰ Together with this majority of indigenous population “white” traditional landed upper classes, small and medium “ladino”¹¹ cattle ranchers and military men and state officials rewarded with land by the state also arrived in Southwest Petén and the Northern Transversal Strip during the second half of the twentieth century. It is in this context that sugarcane (Polochic area) and oil palm (all over) agribusinesses are capturing control over land resources. Control over land resources is understood by Ribot and Peluso as one among three key dynamics ‘constitutive of relations among actors in relation to resource appropriation, management or use’ (2003: 158, 159). These dynamics are *gaining*, *maintaining* and *controlling access* to resources. Access to land resources is understood by Ribot and Peluso as ‘the ability to benefit’ from them’ (2003: 154). *Gaining* access is considered as ‘the more general process by which access is established’ (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 159). Access *maintenance* ‘requires expending resources or powers to keep a particular sort of resource access open’ (ibid.); and access *control* entails ‘the ability to mediate others’ access’ (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 158).

Changing land resources access and control relations due to agribusinesses-led land grabbing is a major catalyzer of political contention in the northern lowlands. Arguably, such contention does not have to do so much with a Polanyian (1968) counter-movement against land and labor commoditization as with a contestation of the ways in which such commoditization is actually taking place. As aforementioned, there were active land and labor markets in the northern lowlands well before the mid-2000s. Since then, however, the combination of Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR) and land titling on facilitating access to local land resources to “outsiders” with the changing international politico-economic scenario which sees land resources as global commodities (to trade with and invest into) has allowed for corporate extractivist accumulation interests to arrive or grow

⁹ As an in-between tenancy and bonded-labor, this social relation has many variants that have evolved through time and place. It generally combines wage-work with in-kind or labor payments to the landlord (patron) in exchange of the *colono*’s family right to live and farm (only) self-provisioning crops in the patron’s estate. On the most recent account of the *colonato* regime in Guatemala see Hurtado (2008).

¹⁰ However, during the 36 years of armed conflict, and especially under the early 1980’s military-led scorched earth policy, 160 massacres were also carried out in the northern lowlands region. The 1996 Peace Agreements put an official end to the conflict, which resulted in 200,000 people killed or disappeared. Over 80% of the victims were civilian, rural, Maya indigenous people (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999).

¹¹ This is the Guatemalan Spanish akin to *mestizo* racialized identity elsewhere in Latin America.

in the northern lowlands to exploit land resources and (only the necessary) labor to turn them into tradable goods. In order to better understand some of the major sources of current unrest among Q'eqchi' lowlanders it is worth outlining here a series of critical dynamics within the political economy and ecology of changing land resource access and control relations following the expansion of sugarcane and oil palm plantations. A task to be performed considering that these sources of discontent are not static but patterning and patterned by the very politics of contemporary agrarian change. Arguably, then, current Q'eqchi' lowlanders' unrest is rooted in historically constituted and interrelated agrarian, socio-ecological and ideological-political grievances, as well as in those emerging from the 'terms of incorporation'¹² to the new extractivist relations of production.

Agrarian grievances arise from changing land resource access and control relations resulting in both changes and stability in property relations. In discussing grievances related to changing land property relations it is worth pointing out that there are two main types of landless families in the northern lowlands. The main one is composed of second and third generations of the 1960s settlers. The second type includes families who recently lost their land. An estimated 11 per cent of the rural households from the investigated areas in the northern lowlands lost their land tenure rights between 2000 and 2010 (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 518). At least three causes of popular discontent should be pointed out here. First, most Q'eqchi' peasant families received a meager payment for their land which neither allowed them to boost a non-farm livelihood nor to regain access to land. Corporate interest in farmland in the context of a legally closed agrarian frontier by the National System of Protected Areas is raising land prices on a weekly basis (ibid.). Second, land use change analysis between 2005 and 2010 shows that as much as 23 per cent of the lands used for oil palm production in 2010 were used by small cultivators to grow staple foods in 2005 (ibid.: 516). And last, but not least, an acute feeling of deception was experienced by some (betrayal for others) with the state as a provider of land tenure security; all corporately-grabbed peasant plots were formally titled by the state Land Fund (FONTIERRAS). As such, the Business Manager of Naturaceites S.A, one of the leading oil palm agribusinesses in Guatemala, makes clear that 'land acquisitions, at least by us, have always been *legal*. If the transaction is *legal* I do not see any problem. We have the *right* to buy. Now, when acquiring land we must be very sure that there are no problems at all with the land title' (quoted in Hernández 2012, stress added). Similar narratives depicting dispossession as a legal, simple market transaction abound in oil palm and sugarcane agribusinesses' legitimating discourses with regards to land deals. Though enticing, such narratives should not be taken at face value. Legal and "voluntary" dispossession is often augmented by violent mechanisms, ranging from coercion, through intimidation and threatening, to direct aggression (issues to which I will come back below). Suffice to say here that half of the surveyed male heads-of-household who lost their land between 2000 and 2010 and did not work for an oil palm/ sugarcane agribusiness in 2010 said they were "forced" to sell their land (another third said they sold it because it was "useless for farming" and the rest because they were "highly indebted") (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 77).

"Useless" farmland and high indebtedness as reasons to give away the land are very telling of another agrarian source of grievances among Q'eqchi' lowlanders. These are rooted in a synergetic interrelation among freehold land tenure, high indebtedness and decreasing agricultural productivity in the northern lowlands land grabbing milieu. On the one hand, private, individual land property rights endorsed by FONTIERRAS might have augmented peasants' abilities to access formal credit. Banks' interest rates ranging from 18 to 26 per cent, per year (users' rates were as high as 120 per cent in 2011) have, nonetheless, either inhibited peasants from applying for credit or led them to losing their land entitlements used as collateral when unable to cope with debt. On the other hand, the generalized shift towards individual land ownership has drastically reshaped Q'eqchi'

¹² Ranging from advantageous to adverse terms and conditions of people's incorporation to a new regime of accumulation (Du Toit 2004: 1003)

lowlanders' system of swidden farming. Freehold land tenure has usually contributed to a shift from the communal allotment of farmland to every family on the basis of their reproductive needs to community farmland being distributed in a series of family-owned, fixed (in time and space) plots. As a result, almost eight out of ten Q'eqchi' households in the northern lowlands have been forced to move from a socially, culturally and agro-ecologically sound traditional swidden farming system (Grandia 2012, Grünberg et al. 2012, Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011) to a more intensive farming system suitable for the new property regime.

Changing land- and water-scapes due to corporate oil palm and sugarcane plantations expansion is a major source of socio-ecological grievances. Land use change analysis also shows that 27 per cent of the lands used for oil palm production in 2010 were covered under rainforest in 2005, while 1 per cent were wetlands and 38 per cent natural pastures (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 516). Rivers are diverted to irrigate plantations and, together with other fresh water sources, are contaminated with sugarcane mill vinasses, oil palm mill effluents and diverse petro-chemical inputs (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011).

Another major source of discontent and grievances is of a cultural nature. As expressed by a Q'eqchi' middle aged peasant man from Sayaxché village, 'we the Q'eqchi' people are facing a major problem. Our thinking is being dominated, as well as our minds and beliefs. This is the outcome of the thinking of the big, rich people who want to dispossess us of our lands once again' (group meeting, March 2010). Indeed many Q'eqchi' lowlanders feel outraged to realize they are losing what was so hard to achieve for them and their elders. That is, fleeing bondage and war to (re)constitute themselves in swidden farming communities in relative isolation from traditional landed upper classes and the state.

Finally, there is also widespread discontent among many Q'eqchi' lowlanders who either sold their lands to become agribusinesses employees, or grow oil palm in their plots to become contract-farmers. On one side, actual employment opportunities were less than envisaged. Oil palm and sugarcane plantations in Guatemala's northern lowlands generate far fewer jobs than peasant farming systems. Oil palm requires 52 working days per hectare per year and sugarcane 36, as opposed, for instance, to the two yearly maize harvests which requires 112 working days, or chili 184 (Dürr 2011, in Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 521). On the other side, many of those who were incorporated in any way into the agribusinesses' relations of production feel they were adversely incorporated (Du Toit 2004), either as plantation laborers (see Hurtado and Sánchez 2011, and Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011) or as contract farmers (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 520).

Overall, such multiple and problematic dynamics involved in the political economy and ecology of contemporary land grabbing by oil palm and sugarcane agribusinesses result in growing difficulties for many to make ends meet. Agrarian, socio-ecological and ideological-political grievances, as well as those derived from adverse incorporation to the new extractivist relations of production, all contribute in many Q'eqchi' lowlanders' feeling that their material and ideological 'subsistence minimums' (Scott 1976) are being violated by oil palm and sugarcane agribusinesses. This feeling is amplified by the narrowing or breaking-off of inter-class reciprocity mechanisms (Thompson 1971, Scott 1976) which if anything allowed for the continuous (re)negotiation of minimum material survival standards between non-indigenous landed upper classes and Q'eqchi' *rural classes of labor*.¹³ As argued by Don Pedro Sub,¹⁴ an elder Q'eqchi' man and former landless laborers' movement leader:

¹³ Defined by Bernstein as comprising all those who 'have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and increasingly 'informalised' wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment' (Bernstein 2010b: 73).

Sometimes I wonder if we have really advanced at all. As colonos in the coffee state the Patron would squeeze our very last strengths out of us making us work for almost nothing. But still we would always have a patch of land to grow our maize. If something went wrong with our harvest he would never let us starve or die of a simple cold. He looked after us because he needed us. Now we are free laborers, they say. Free to starve and beg, I say. Now the rich people do not care about us anymore. We are expendable for them now.

Interview in Panzós village, November 2007

There are at least two things worth commenting on Don Pedro's striking but not so uncommon statement. First, it resembles Bernstein's fundamental 'agrarian question of labor'. That is, 'what if the forms of capitalism, including industrialization [...] in the South today are incapable of generating sufficient, and sufficiently secure, employment to provide 'a living wage' to the great majority?' (2006: 13). This is a key issue in dealing with current politics of agrarian change in Guatemala, which Li (2010) also puts forward in the case of contemporary rural Asia. She, like Don Pedro, addresses the problematic from a Foucaultian perspective to argue that 'the large unemployed (or precariously so) populations are in fact "surplus" to the requirements of capital accumulation' (Li 2010: 67). Second, Don Pedro's and similar perceptions are rooted in historically constituted subsistence levels among Q'eqchi' lowlanders. These living memories are generally linked to recent experiences as immigrant settlers in self-managed farming communities and to experiences with the *colonato* labor regime in traditional estates. In this regard, many elder Q'eqchi' participants' responses in individual and group interviews coincide with those of Don Pedro in that even though patron-client types of relations under the previously dominant *colonato* labor regime in traditional estates were exploitative and often humiliating, they still allowed for negotiating with the patron the minimum requirements for the biological reproduction of the family. Even wage and labor conditions of "autonomous" peasants who would eventually work for traditional estate owners were based upon such (if not celebrated at least tolerated) moral economic arrangements. Things have changed, though, under current the hyper-commodified and more impersonal flexible labor regime enforced by oil palm and sugarcane agribusinesses. Wages, labor arrangements and conditions are standardized by absentee owners. This makes it almost impossible to negotiate subsistence minimums, at least in previously conducted forms.

Of course, besides being constituted throughout Q'eqchi' peoples' history, subsistence minimums are differently experienced by different subjects and social groups. Multiple positionings in terms of class, gender and generational attributes and their intersections are prone to multiple interpretations of what 'subsistence' is and where its (minimum) threshold stands. For instance, Q'eqchi' food growers (landed or not, part-time laborers or not) show not only higher standards but also higher satisfaction levels of their reproduction needs in comparison to non-farming Q'eqchi' rural laborers (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 117). Poorer Q'eqchi' women tend to include access to drinking water, firewood, housing materials and medicinal plants as minimum requirements for subsistence (ibid.) more strongly than less-poor women and men in general and, Q'eqchi' elders consider free access to and respect for sacred places as fundamental, while Q'eqchi' youngsters of different genders and classes consider important access to information technologies and show, generally, more urban living standards (see also Grandia 2012, and Grünberg et al. 2012).

Conducts are more difficult to conduct, or government more difficult to exercise, when the material bases of exploitation and the political and ideological practices of dominance are perceived as violating subsistence minimums. Arguably, such differently experienced but often vital grievances,

¹⁴ His real name is quoted here, attending to his own request.

and the difficulties to deal with them, are leading many to make of their unrest a practice of resistance.

3 Q'eqchi' lowlanders' practices of resistance

Resistance practices are neither an ideologically clear-cut process nor a univocal path towards successful counter-hegemony by subordinate classes, genders, ethnic or generational groups. Resistance is rather a complex and often messy dynamic prone to multiple interventions (at different scales and places) and tensions (among/ between, across and within contending parts) which may boost, transform, or even neutralize resistance temporarily or perpetually.

Thus, among multiple resistance practices of material and ideological nature I will concentrate here on both, 'everyday' and militant, collective (or at least coordinated) struggles to defend, reclaim or gain access to and control over land resources as means of production and/or as territory. I will explore, first, the way Q'eqchi' lowlanders' unrest is *framed* through 'shared understandings and identities that justify, dignify and animate collective action' (Tarrow 1998: 21). I will then give an account of 'everyday' and militant *repertoires of contention*, that is, 'the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests' (Tilly 1995, in Tarrow 1998: 30).

3.1 Resistance to landgrabbing as defense of territory

A brief and deliberately reductionist historical account of (broad) master frames of contention in rural Guatemala, if not from colonialism and the liberal revolution of 1871 then at least from the mid-twentieth century onwards, is helpful to better understand Q'eqchi' lowlanders' (among others') master frame of contention nowadays. During war times (1962-1996), and arguably since the early twentieth century, the historical-political subject in Guatemala was constituted by masses of urban and especially rural poor working classes. Peasant organizations of national scope, imbued by and linked to a range of socialist guerrillas or to the liberation theology doctrine of the Catholic Church (or to both), framed their struggle as a land-to-the-tiller redistributive land reform as part of the broader strife for the popular take-over of state powers and the instauration of socialism. Many of these organizations have disappeared, but others still remain active and will be referred to here as "historical-militant" (national) peasant organizations. An incipient (and still so) urban proletariat was put at the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle and claims specific to indigenous peoples, (rural) women and youth (among others) were conditioned by revolutionary success even though the ranks of insurgency included subjects with all these different attributes.

Neoliberalism was forged and enforced in Guatemala almost a decade before all Peace Agreements were finally signed in 1996, and the impacts of Washington Consensus' liberalization, privatization and deregulation were already a major source of grievances among (rural) classes of labor. The 1992 National Peasant Congress echoed the problems of unfavorable terms of (agricultural) trade and the dumping of cheap, subsidized corn from the USA, but (rural) democratization was the major issue at stake. 1992 was also the 500th anniversary of the Spanish invasion of the Americas and the year Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya-Quiche woman and at the time still member of the national militant peasant organization *Comité de Unidad Campesina* – CUC – (Committee of Peasant Unity), was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. By this year, and after the worst scorched-earth massacres were held by the military during the eighties,¹⁵ popular expectations of the success of the revolution vanished. Peasant organizations and others framed their contention as a *struggle for life* (*lucha por*

¹⁵ In a historic but yet unfinished trial, one of the most influential army Generals at the time, Efraín Ríos Montt, was convicted by a Guatemalan Court for Genocide and Crimes against Humanity on May 10, 2013. Ten days later, the Constitutional Court decided to undo the guilty verdict and the new trial court expressed unavailability until April 2014 (<http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/>, accessed on June 7, 2013).

la vida) where respect for human life and integrity, and people's civil and political rights, were at the forefront.

It was only after the peace agreements were signed in 1996, and in the context of deepened neoliberalization, that national militant peasant organizations embraced food sovereignty as the master frame of their struggle against the 'corporate food regime' (Friedmann and McMichael 1989) accompanying neoliberal globalization. The food sovereignty paradigm was put forward by the transnational agrarian movement La Vía Campesina in the 1996 World Food Summit organized by the FAO. Since then, the meaning of food sovereignty has evolved to include not only "peasant" interests and worldviews but also those of fisherfolks and pastoralists as well as those of indigenous peoples and rural women and youth more broadly (See Desmarais 2007 and the February 2007 Nyeleni Declaration on Food Sovereignty <http://www.nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>). Such a broadening of the food sovereignty concept is accompanied (and arguably influenced) in Guatemala by growing organizational expressions of indigenous peoples, rural women and youth (among others), which were either newly formed or resettled in the country's politics arena after years of clandestine activity or working from exile.

From the mid-2000s onwards, and in the context of what I name (in the absence of a fancier and less formulaic definition) the new extractivist accumulation and governmental project in Guatemala, rural peoples are adding to the problems derived from the workings of commodity and credit markets' *invisible hand* those related to its *visible fist*. In other words, to the marginalization of the peasantry (and of small cultivators more broadly) from food, commodity and credit markets during the previous period of orthodox neoliberalization it is now added their marginalization from land and labor markets as rural classes of labor and from territorial land resources as peoples.

It is therefore in this context of converging, interrelated and historically constituted agrarian, socio-ecological, ideological-political and economic grievances that resistance is increasingly framed as a defense of territory. Even if the concept is not necessarily "new", it is within the current cycle of contention against the extractivist path of agrarian change and territorial restructuring that defense of territory is given broader political meaning by grassroots collectivities. Indeed, one of the constitutive and most distinctive features of this frame of contention is that it has been put forward in the national political arena from below. There are, of course, leaders and ideologues actively shaping the concept discursively. But they are generally grassroots voices and usually accountable to a nearby, broader collectivity. It is from them, and from there, that national militant peasants, indigenous rural women's and youth organizations adopt the concept. The significance of self-representation in framing contention was arguably advanced in Guatemala by peasant organizations embracing La Vía Campesina's pathbreaking slogan "not about us without us". But as I will further discuss below, it will be now that self-representation is strategically enshrined as a *sine qua non* condition of the struggle in defense of territory. In the case of many Q'eqchi' lowlanders self-representation in defense of territory is underpinned by their collective identity as *R'al Ch'och* (Sons and Daughters of the Earth). This ethnic identity, which is strongly linked to a particular peasant class identity, gives outstanding importance to a respectful and reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth (see Ybarra 2011, and Grandia 2012). Framing resistance in this way, as *R'al Ch'och* indigenous-peasants in defense of territory, dignifies, encourages and justifies Q'eqchi' lowlanders' collective action around aforementioned material and ideational grievances.

3.2 Repertoire and forms of contention in defense of territory

Tilly understood the repertoire of contention 'as the whole set of means that a group has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups' (1986: 4, in Tarrow 2012: 222). There are

multiple “groups” currently involved in the contentious politics of agrarian change and territorial restructuring in Guatemala. Following my line of argumentation I will deal here with the repertoire of contention deployed by different Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ groups within and across communities and grassroots organizations alone or together with diverse national militant organizations and other civil society groups part of rural social movements. For Tarrow, social movements are ‘those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action *frames*, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents’ (1998: 2, stress added). But as Tilly remarks, ‘social movements are a particular, historically discrete form of organizing contention and not the be-all and end-all of contentious politics’ (2004b, in Tarrow 2012: 222). Accordingly, I will outline here both overt militant forms of resistance and low-profile everyday forms of resistance informing the (general) repertoire of contention against dominant extractivist forces in the northern lowlands.

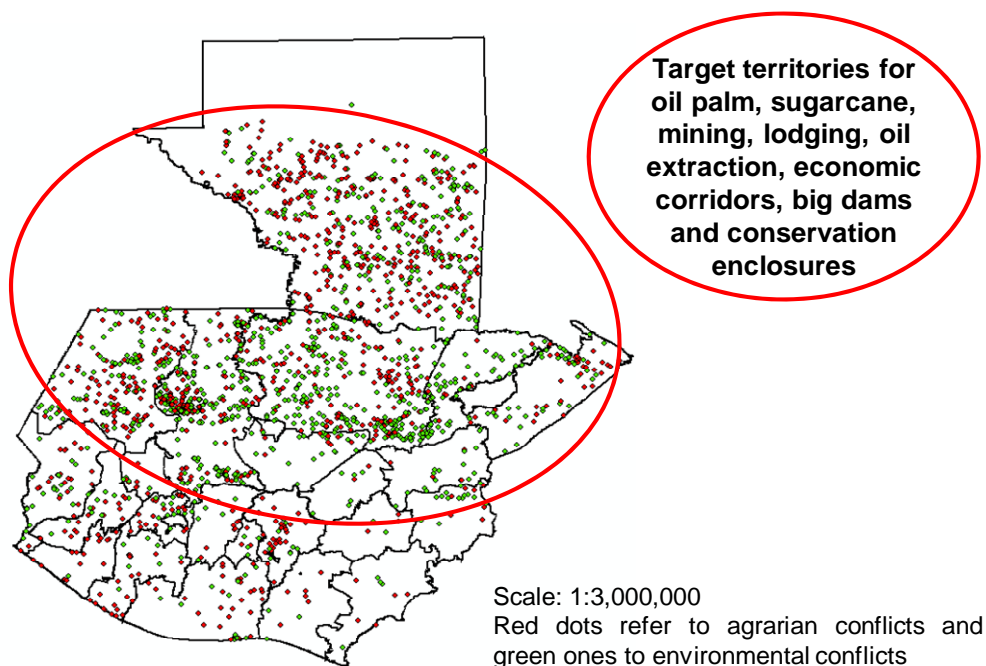
Scott understands everyday forms of resistance broadly as ‘the nearly permanent, continuous, daily strategies of subordinate rural classes under difficult conditions’ (1986: 22). As such, they can be read as neither confrontational nor conventional kinds of coping strategies for many Q’eqchi’ lowlanders with governable space-making efforts of corporate and state actors. Besides widespread gossiping and criticism about the agribusinesses in trust networks, it is worth mentioning four other recurrent forms documented since 2006 among different groups, villages and areas in the northern lowlands. The first one is a group walking off work in the plantations without prior notice or justifications whatsoever. When consulted about why they made such a decision, a common answer was that ‘foremen and engineers should know why’. In some cases (Sayaxché, Ixcán and Chisec) the reason was unfulfilled promises of the oil palm companies to support the local school or to repair the roads. In other cases (Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and El Estor) reasons were more related to offenses by foremen (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 161). There are also cases (in Panzós, Ixcán and Chisec) where a tacit agreement exists among community members to not work in a plantation (ibid.). The second form of everyday resistance identified is also linked to labor grievances. In alleviating exploitation levels in plantation work, foot-dragging and (whenever possible) reporting more work than actually performed are also common strategies all over the northern lowlands (Hurtado and Sánchez 2011, Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011). However, foot-dragging among workers from Ixcán and Chisec villages laboring for the oil palm agribusiness Palmas del Ixcán S.A reached sabotage dimensions. The President of the oil palm contract farmers’ association reported how full sacks of agro-chemicals were directly buried instead of applied, and how plantation drain canals were dug only nearby the roads through which foremen pass by supervising the works, but not further inside (interview in Chisec village on July 16, 2013). According to this interviewee, such practices almost drove the company to bankruptcy and resulted in workers from these villages no longer being hired in retaliation. The third form of everyday resistance has to do with a wave of arsons in two distinct and faraway areas of the northern lowlands. The first broke out around 2006-2007 in Southwest Petén area. A series of “accidents” by food cultivators while burning the fields to get them ready for farming resulted in nearby oil palms being burned. When questioned, Q’eqchi’ community members always attributed such incidents to negligence. However, oil palm agribusinesses have sued the owners of the land plots from where the fire extended to their plantations charging them US\$ 1,875 for each mature oil palm burned.¹⁶ This outraged sued-peasants and their neighbors who, in many instances, found no other option than selling or giving away their land to the oil palm companies as payment (group meetings in two different hamlets, Sayaxché village, May 2010). Similarly, fire used to prepare fields for farming in The Polochic area spread in 2007 and 2008 to adjacent sugarcane and oil palm plantations with similar outcomes. The only difference was that in the Polochic area maize cultivators were just leasing land and the payment had to be done through free labor for the companies (inter-community meeting in Panzós village, October 2008). Finally, a recurrent everyday form of resistance by Q’eqchi’ women from

¹⁶ The official monthly minimum wage in Guatemala in 2006 was US\$ 190 (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 45).

different villages has been to hide the land title away from their partners to complicate the sale of the family plot (reported in meetings with women representatives of women associations from Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, October 2009; Ixcán, December 2009; and in Chisec, December 2009). Even though individual land titles are registered by FONTIERRAS in the name of both heads-of-household (when existing) it is usually men, indigenous or not, who have the last word about land deals. Indeed, 86 per cent of the total female heads-of-household who lost their land until 2010 never gave their consent to sell the family plot (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 519).

Scott also stated how everyday forms of resistance ‘at times of *crisis* or *momentous political change* may be complemented by other forms of struggle which are more opportune. [Everyday forms] are the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow’ (1986: 22, stress added). And this is exactly what has been at stake throughout the northern lowlands. Everyday forms have been complemented by and/or scaled-up towards more confrontational and organized forms of defiance. In July 2012, the Guatemalan Secretary of Agrarian Affairs reported ‘1,214 cases of unresolved agrarian conflicts in the country (involving) 1,000,055 peasants claiming rights over 338,935 hectares of land’ (*Prensa Libre* September 4, 2012). These are only “officially registered” conflicts, so not all conflicts are included. Figure 2 below shows how 76.4 per cent of the conflicts reported by the Secretary concentrate in the territories facing extractivist dynamics of agrarian change and territorial restructuring.

Figure 2: Geographical location of the 1,214 agrarian and environmental conflicts registered by the Government of Guatemala in 2012



Source: Based on Government of Guatemala (<http://portal.saa.gob.gt/> accessed on July 25, 2012). Besides everyday forms of resistance, then, lowlanders’ repertoire of contention in defense of territory includes organized strategies in the economic, legal, political and symbolic realms. As argued by one Q’eqchi’ ideologue of the struggle in defense of territory, the strategic interest of this frame of contention lies in ‘moving from practices of cultural resistance to the full exercise of collective rights in the territory’ (Q’eqchi’ lawyer and current Member of Congress, in APROBASANK’s workshop in Guatemala City, June 26, 2013). In this way, ‘any third party, for instance the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, an oil palm company or a conservation NGO, needs to

negotiate with a collectivity, which we envisage primarily as the *community*, represented through its own organizational and representational forms, and not with individuals' (ibid.). Such a claim is founded in disappointing experiences of Q'eqchi' lowlanders, APROBASANK, the Social Pastoral of the Catholic Church and many other organizations supporting land titling under the auspices of World Bank-designed and financed Market Led Agrarian Reform and land titling programmes. These negative experiences contributed to reframing the narrower (private) ownership route towards "land tenure security" as the more encompassing defense of territory route towards 'the juridical-political status as subjects of collective rights' (as put forward by the Q'eqchi' grassroots organization APROBASANK in the aforementioned workshop). Accordingly, the repertoire of contention is also moving from strategies to secure Q'eqchi' lowlanders' property rights to strategies to secure their access to and control over land resources as means of production and as territory. In fact, the latter include the former and go well beyond them. Defense of territory entails a multiple repertoire of contention addressing both more defensive strategies to *maintain* access to and control over land resources, as well as more offensive strategies to *gain* access and for *repossession*.

Regarding, first, the repertoire and forms of contention to maintain access to and control over land resources it is often argued by leading ideologues and grassroots organizations that forcing the state to formally recognize Q'eqchi' communities as subjects of collective rights is a relatively simple 'juridical juggling' (Q'eqchi' lawyer and member of Parliament and APROBASANK, workshop in Guatemala City, June 26 2013). But as they have come to realize, such recognition is of little use without a strong, ideologically clear grassroots organization and a vibrant economic system. Thus, the repertoire of contention against dispossession among many Q'eqchi' lowlanders, especially in the Northern Transversal Strip and Southwest Petén areas, includes strategies for community self-determination in political, regulatory and economic realms. That is, on the one side, the creation and/or strengthening of community systems to govern land resources, community politics and justice. Many Q'eqchi' (but also non-indigenous) grassroots forms of contention against corporate dispossession in the northern lowlands involve the refusal to give right of way through community lands to sugarcane and/or oil palm agribusinesses' trucks, machinery or laborers, as a response to the same practices of the agribusinesses. But most often, Q'eqchi' lowlanders attempt to resist dispossession by counter-ruling individual freehold land entitlements through the banning of any kind of land deal with cattle ranchers or corporate agents (see below). A communal deed usually works as a transcript to "formalize" the agreement and to make it legible to outsiders. For instance, a communal deed from a hamlet in Sayaxché village states: 'In communities where companies are already there they do not respect people's freedom...they privatize all that is indigenous peoples' patrimony [...so they agree] nobody is going to participate in land deals' (community deed number 19-2007). In other cases, communal government institutions prevent community members from lending or leasing land to those who sold their land to a rancher or a corporate agent without a community-sanctioned valid reason, or without offering it first to other community members. The case of a hamlet from Ixcán village is a good example. A member of the community sold his land (individually titled) to an agent working for the oil palm agribusiness Palmas del Ixcán S.A., but the community did not recognize the transaction as legitimate. On May 2008 community authorities met with the Guatemalan Ombudsman representative, Palmas del Ixcán representatives, the corporate agent and the community member who sold the land. Communal authorities argued for 'the non-interference of Palmas del Ixcán in community affairs or territory' as a sign of respect for their memories of 'subjugation as colonos in the haciendas' and for 'the relevance for us to defend a piece of land which cost many lives to achieve'. Palmas del Ixcán S.A finally agreed not to expand its plantations within the community's territory (Ombudsman office deed of May 19, 2008 and group meeting in the community on December 2009). Similar practices, resembling Wolf's (1957) closed corporate Meso-American peasant communities of the 1950s, include that of not accepting as a new

community member anyone known to have voluntarily sold his or her land before, and that of expelling from the community anyone who violates these kinds of agreements.

Notwithstanding, this counter-ruling is seldom effective in steering the conduct of communitarians with state-endorsed, individual freehold rights over land when aforementioned reasons for peasants to engage in land deals are not addressed. This is why, on the other side, the repertoire to maintain access to and control over land resources entails the development and/or strengthening of sustainable economic alternatives. In the context of Q'eqchi' lowlanders these are usually focused on farming. It was previously mentioned how individual land ownership has forced Q'eqchi' swidden farmers to shift to a more intensive farming system suitable for the new property regime. Agricultural intensification has been pursued by corporations and governments alike through increased dependence on expensive petro-chemical inputs. Evidence from soil analysis (Mingorría and Gamboa 2010: 51) and pioneering low external input agricultural practices (AVSF and SANK. 2011) show, however, that the key towards enhanced productivity in the organic manure-lacking karstic soils of the northern lowlands lies less in a new "Green Revolution miracle" than in the ability of the household to divert higher amounts of human workforce towards the agro-ecological intensification of the farm. With a financially weakened (and usually politically unwilling) state to support this strategy, a form of contention in the productive front lies in "*Campesino a Campesino*" (Farmer to Farmer, see Holt-Giménez 2006) agroecological knowledge exchanges. These are carried out mainly in the Northern Transversal Strip and Southwest Petén areas with support from grassroots organizations, a few (inter)national NGOs like *Agronomes et Vétérinaires Sans Frontières* France (AVSF), The National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty in Guatemala (REDSAG in its Spanish acronym), the Social Pastoral of the Catholic Church, and some scholars and progressive government officials. A closely related struggle is that for increased control over local food markets in search of more favorable terms of trade. Two good examples are the "Agroecological Market" in Sayaxché Village, promoted by grassroots associations supported by the Social Pastoral of Petén (though it has not been active in 2013), and the "Peasant Markets" promoted by APROBASANK and the "Maya-Q'eqchi' Farmers Federation" (FAMA) running twice a week in Chisec and Raxruhá and where only direct producers are allowed to trade their products. It is in these ways the food sovereignty frame is mutually constitutive with the defense of territory.

The repertoire of contention in defense of territory also includes struggles to *gain* access to land resources and for *repossession*. These involve generally young (but not only) Q'eqchi' lowlanders willing to lead a relatively more autonomous livelihood as food cultivators and many families who lost their land. Struggles to gain access to land resources and for repossession are generally of organized character and often confrontational. They are basically inherited from decades of struggle for a redistributive land reform aimed at "taking back the land". Among current struggles for *repossession* there are two worth commenting here for its nature and forms of contention. Both are located in the Northern Transversal Strip area. The first one is that of a community from Fray Bartolomé de las Casas village which had its land titled by the state in 1981, long before the Market Led Agrarian Reform was implemented by FONTIERRAS. Around 20 hectares of community land was seized by a large cattle rancher in the late 1990's and since then community representatives have been complaining to FONTIERRAS about it. FONTIERRAS' officials always told community authorities not to worry because the land was fully titled as a Collective Agrarian Patrimony in the name of the community. However, in 2008 staff and machinery from the oil palm company PADESA (now Naturaceites S.A.) installed an oil palm plantation in the 20 hectares seized. The cattle rancher had become an oil palm outgrower. Discouraged by FONTIERRAS' and other government institutions' inaction, the community decided to occupy the plantation, chop the branches of the oil palms off and farm maize and beans and among them. The company reacted by stating that "the conflict is

between the community and the outgrower and PADESA has nothing to do with it.¹⁷ Anyway, it is not a serious problem. It is just an issue of overlapping land limits which FONTIERRAS and the National Cadastral Registry should deal with” (group meeting with community representatives and copy of the letter sent by them to FONTIERRAS, and interview with PADESA representatives, October 2009). The second example of Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ struggle for repossession involves the same oil palm company and a community from Raxruhá village. The community, surrounded by oil palm plantations, addressed on June 2012 a claim to the municipal government, FONTIERRAS and the company because 2.5 hectares of community land was being used by the company as an oil palm nursery. Facing no response by any of the addressees, the community decided on November 4, 2012 to block the nearby national road and allow drivers to bypass the blockage once they had carried two baby oil palms from the nursery to the middle of the road (*Prensa Libre* November 5, 2012; community manifesto, November 9, 2012; and interview with community representative in June 2013).

In struggling to *gain* access to land resources, group land occupations remain the primary form of contention. The strategy behind occupations is not always and necessarily to claim the occupied land but to force a negotiation with state authorities. Undoubtedly, the occupation of sugarcane plantations by hundreds of landless Q’eqchi’ families in the Polochic valley in 2010, and the violent evictions following in 2011, is the most striking example of this form of contention in the recent history of the northern lowlands. From 2004-2005 onwards, the oligarchic Widdman family started buying 5,400 hectares from several traditional estates in the Polochic valley to move their sugar mill from Guatemala’s southern Pacific coast to the Polochic Valley area under the name of ‘Chabil Utzaj’ sugar mill (‘Good Cane’ in Q’eqchi’ language). The area was populated by Q’eqchi’ families in well-established *colonato* relationships with the estate owners, who were already negotiating the sale of the land to the *colonos* through the government’s MLAR program. Although the negotiations had dragged on, slowed down by FONTIERRAS’ bureaucratic procedures, they suddenly came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of the Chabil Utzaj sugar mill in the Valley. The higher prices offered by the sugar mill to the traditional estate owners put an end to the negotiations between the latter and the *colono* families. In exchange for a higher price, the Chabil Utzaj demanded that the land be registered in the National Property Register and that all labor liabilities be settled, which meant the *colono* families could be expelled through ‘perfectly legal’ means. Facing expulsion, more than 700 landless (and jobless) Q’eqchi’ families occupied fourteen of the estates in November 2010. In March 2011, 1,500 police and military forces (together with Chabil Utzaj’s ‘private security’) violently evicted around 760 families. Houses and crops were burned and one Q’eqchi’ farmer was killed by the police. Two more would be assassinated by paramilitaries later on. In June 2011, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission called on the Guatemalan state to secure the life and food security of evicted families (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011 and Franco et al. 2013: 8-9). As of August 2013, violence continues while the government announced land allocation for 158 of the evicted families by September 15 (Guatemala’s Independence Day). Another group of 14 families, occupying one estate which was never evicted, negotiated with the Sugar Mill the allocation of 1.5-hectare land plots within the occupied land and with the allocation of “additional farm land” by the government (interview with a participant in the negotiations, July 2013). Around 600 evicted families are still struggling for their claims to be attended.

All these forms of contention in defense of territory, either to struggle against dispossession, to gain access to land resources, or for repossession are all relatively well-known among contending actors. This is a repertoire imbued with tactics and forms of contention inherited from previous cycles of contention. Nonetheless, a distinctive feature of their use within the current cycle of contention is that very often contenders deploy these known tactics and forms of contention not as an end but as

¹⁷ Such a statement was, by the way, seen as a betrayal by the outgrower, according to community representatives.

a means of *strategic litigation* processes. Such processes involve diverse grassroots practices of material and ideological resistance which put political pressure “from below”, politico-juridical lobby and advocacy “from above”, as well as systematic research and social communication efforts across scales.

3.3 Alliance building in defense of territory: scaling up the struggle

Awareness of the structural nature of their grievances and growing interest in articulating the repertoire of contention through processes of strategic litigation is pulling Q’eqchi’ lowlanders to forge tactical and strategic alliances. This is not an easy task though. It is rather a complex and continuous effort mediated by organizational and socio-cultural differences and by the political dynamics of contention itself. Q’eqchi’ lowlanders have probably found not many, but definitely diverse allies: there are (inter)national development and human rights NGOs and engaged researchers, (independent) media journalists, the Catholic Church and even some progressive state actors.

Among the latter, the “two doors policy group” stands out. This is a group of government officials headed by the Secretary of the Integrated Rural Development Bureau and the Minister of Food, Livestock and Agriculture who advocate for a differentiated policy response to peasant economies and to agribusinesses ‘searching for intersections and possible complementarities between the two rural development models in contention’.¹⁸ Advocates of this policy fix are critical of both radical rural social movements and conservative hardcore oligarchs – a positioning that fits like a glove within current governmental efforts to promote a ‘new extractivism committed to the rule of law and the promotion of the green economy with corporate social and ecological responsibility’.¹⁹ Indeed, members of rural social movements’ organizations which tone down their claims, or even better, which overtly join the new extractivist bandwagon are prioritized by the government as subjects of the so far just discursively fancy (but potentially relevant) “Family Farming Programme for the Strengthening of the Peasant Economy”. This cooptation is just one among a series of mechanism of a “divide and win strategy” to which I will return below. Suffice to mention here the (historical) accusation of embracing a ‘confrontational and intimidating attitude [as part of] the most polarizing organizations in our society’ made by the militant *National Indigenous and Peasant Coordination* (a CLOC-Vía Campesina member) to the *Committee of Peasant Unity* (CUC, also a CLOC-Vía Campesina member) in a press release published in written media on the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (*elperiódico*, August 9, 2013).

A recent, unexpected and charismatic state-ally is the mayor of Raxruhá village, in the Northern Transversal Strip area. He was sued in the Constitutional Court by the agribusiness-controlled ‘Guatemalan Agricultural Chamber’ (*Cámara del Agro*) because his municipal government tried to tax oil palm agribusinesses operating in the village area. No matter the verdict, this tough response by the agribusinesses offended the mayor who now demands oil palm agribusinesses to quit operations in Raxruhá with the support of all the 56 auxiliary community mayors (interview with Raxruhá mayor and attendance to meeting of village authorities in Raxruhá, June 6 2013).

¹⁸ As exposed by current Minister of Food, Livestock and Agriculture and San Carlos University Researcher at the “Conference on Agrarian and Rural Dynamics in 21st Century Guatemala”. Rafael Landivar University, San Carlos University, The Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences and the Guatemalan Institute of Agrarian and Rural Studies in Guatemala City, October 11, 2011.

¹⁹ General Director of Strategic Policy from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in the “I National Congress on Racism and Discrimination” organized by the Government of Guatemala in Guatemala City, August 7 to 9, 2013.

However, it is national, militant peasant, indigenous, rural women and youth organizations and movements who are perceived as “natural” allies by many Q’eqchi’ lowlanders.²⁰ However, these alliances are not tension-free. Increasingly complex class configurations emerging from land grab-driven dynamics of agrarian change, intersecting with age, gender and kinship attributes, result in a diverse range of interests and positionings within and among Q’eqchi’ communities. This is not always properly read by militant movement organizations, which often approach Q’eqchi’ communities as a tabula rasa. This, together with a sometimes not so accurate grasp of local politics, dynamics of contention and particular conceptions of justice by overwhelmed community organizers from militant national organizations result in mutual complains. Leaders from national movement organizations complain that ‘sometimes is very hard to push people to organize to struggle for their access to land’ (interview with a community organizer from the Committee of Peasant Unity – CUC – in Cobán City, October 2009). Community leaders, however, claim sometimes that ‘national organizations do not pay the necessary attention to local dynamics and paces of struggle and thus their support is many times misplaced and late’ (interview with the Coordinator of APROBASANK, a grassroots Q’eqchi’ organization in Chisec village, December 2009). Indeed, Q’eqchi’ lowlanders and their claims are perceived as “too indigenous” for some class-based peasant organizations and “too peasantist” for many Pan-Maya indigenous organizations.

Nonetheless, different Q’eqchi’ communities, groups and grassroots organizations consider engaging more actively with militant rural social movements (often linked to Latin American and global activist networks) to augment the political impact of their struggle in defense of territory beyond local and territorial scales. Conversely, Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ place-based practices of resistance allow for the relocalization of militant rural social movements. Many of these historical indigenous, peasant, women and rural laborers social movements resulted somehow detached from territorial practices of resistance after their full commitment to energy-consuming (factionalizing and bureaucratizing) struggles in the national and international arenas during the last two decades.²¹ As argued by a long-standing peasant leader from the south coast region and at that time member of the secretariat of the National Peasant Organization’s Coordination (CNO), member of CLOC-Via Campesina:

I am fed up with looking up to see the rich people seeing us marching from their high office buildings and grinning because they know all we are to achieve, at best, is a paternalistic aid agreement to our structural demands, which besides it is seldom honored. See, we have been at the integrated rural development negotiation table with two different governments so far and things in the countryside only get worse. It is about time we blossom up again from below. It is about time we move the forefront of the struggle back to the countryside.

Interview in Guatemala City, July 2007

Indeed, place-based Q’eqchi’ practices of resistance in defense of territory, together with those of other indigenous and mestizo peoples’ in the Guatemalan western highlands and the eastern region are reshaping “from below” the frames and repertoires of contention of many historical rural social movements. Most distinctively, the “land to the tiller” and “food sovereignty” frames are integrated within defense of territory. And lobbying, advocacy and negotiations are increasingly part of more

²⁰ With a few exceptions, relationships with most of the mainly urban, middle and upper class-led Guatemalan environmental movements are rather difficult though (not to mention those with big international conservation NGOs). On this see Ybarra (2011) and Grandia (2012).

²¹ I.e., challenging the neoliberal corporate food regime orchestrated at the World Trade Organization, and free trade agreements like the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), the USA, Dominican Republic and Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) and the Association Agreement with the European Union.

strategic litigation processes in which social (e.g., the International Commission of Jurists, the Maya Lawyers Association or the Guatemalan Independent Media Center) and state actors (e.g., The Inter-American Human Rights Commission and Court, The Strategic Litigation Support Team of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and even a Canadian Court²²) are becoming relevant allies in struggles in defense of territory.

Especially since 2011 there have been a series of systematic “Meetings of Ancestral Indigenous Authorities” gathering hundreds of such authorities from different peoples and regions in Guatemala concluding, for instance, ‘to continue with our peoples’ and communities’ resistance considering our common history which projects itself into the future to achieve the good living in a plurinational, democratic and fair state’ (Nebaj Declaration, June 22, 2013). The “4th National Peasant Congress” is due in 2014. But a major example of strategic alliances being forged across grassroots groups and organizations and national rural social movements’ organizations lies in the “Popular, Peasant and Indigenous March” (*La Marcha Indígena, Campesina y Popular*). Originally planned as a nine-day and 212 kilometers march from Cobán to Guatemala City on March 2012 by Q’eqchi’ people from evicted communities in the Polochic Valley together with the Committee of Peasant Unity (CUC), it became a path-breaking political event within the current cycle of contention. Grassroots delegations from all over the country and other militant organizations such as the Highland Peasant Committee (CCDA) joined the march on “defense of Mother Earth, against evictions and the criminalization of resistance and for integrated rural development”. Some 15,000 people walked into Guatemala City on March 27, 2012 and handed in a series of petitions to the President and Congress leaders of all political parties. The President stated in a press conference that the government had primarily agreed upon the nine points of petition, but ‘five were accepted conditionally to legal revision. The four agreed points have to do with agrarian conflicts resolution and preventing armed groups from harassing peasant communities. However, cancelling the credit-debt of hundreds of peasant groups purchasing land through FONTIERRAS’ MLAR, the *moratorium for some development projects led by private investors* and the withdrawal of new military detachments were signed with reservations’ (President Pérez Molina declarations on press conference, *Prensa Libre* March 28, 2012, stress added). As for the party leaders in the Congress, a deed was signed where they agreed to include for plenary discussion the legal initiative 4084 on the Integrated Rural Development System Law and to plea to the plenary to pass such an initiative as a matter of “national urgency”. They also agreed to ‘socialize’ with their party members in the Congress ‘issues related to a substantive agrarian legislation as well as to general legislation on the rights of indigenous peoples, sacred places, indigenous peoples’ community lands, and to pass derogatory clauses for the articles about (land) usurpation and aggravated usurpation in the penal code’ (agreement deed of the Guatemalan Congress, March 27, 2012). As of June 2013, the government on most of the points and Congressmen on all of them have failed to honor their agreements. But the organizations involved in the March keep coordinating to push for their realization.

The slogan and petitions of the “Popular, Peasant and Indigenous March” are very telling of the main issues at stake within contemporary political dynamics of agrarian change and territorial restructuring in Guatemala. Indeed, the March’s petitions express not only claims and proposals in defense of territory but also new grievances linked to the strategies deployed by dominant state and social actors working on the making of governable spaces to accommodate extractivist accumulation interests.

²² On July 22, 2013 Ontario’s Court of Justice ruled against the Canadian mining company Hudbay Minerals for the violent events that occurred in the Polochic Area on 2007 and 2009. This is the first time a Canadian company is judged for human rights violations by one of its subsidiaries in another state (*el periódico* July 29, 2013).

4 Defense of territory and the making of governable spaces by dominant state and social actors

Frames and repertoires of contention neither inform only resistance practices, nor are they external to, or autonomous from, struggles themselves. They serve ‘just as easily for social control as for insurgency’ (Tarrow 1998: 202) and are in fact critical arenas of struggle where contending parts may seek to counter or influence each other’s discourses, positionings and practices. Broadly speaking, Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ (and others’) struggles in defense of territory clash in multiple ways with dominant state and social actors working on the making of governable spaces to accommodate extractivist accumulation interests. Whether to counter defense of territory practices of resistance, to advance extractivist accumulation and government interests, or both, dominant state and social actors employ a repertoire of contention based in two major and mutually reinforcing strategies. One is based in the old “divide and win” strategy. Its aim is to succeed in the making of governable spaces through enticement and its fundamental form of contention is of a discursive and financial nature. The other major strategy is based on the “rule of law”. This has a double purpose: to secure what has been accomplished through enticement and/or to achieve through coercion what enticing cannot. Accordingly, its fundamental forms of contention are of a regulatory and violent nature.

Dominant state and social actors pushing for extractivist interests have come to realize that local and territorial scales are currently as important as national and international ones, if not more so, to advance and secure their interests. Thus, they invest considerable efforts and resources in the making of governable spaces at these scales. On the one hand, they articulate the “divide and win” strategy, aware of the fact that ‘beliefs, ideological controls and discursive practices, as well as negotiated systems of meaning, shape all forms of access [to resources]’ (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 168). With this purpose sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses employ a series of charismatic agents to work their ways through villages and communities. These well-paid corporate ideologues are popularly known as “coyotes” and due to their local recognition²³ they are able to pervade communal government institutions to counter the symbolic power underpinning hegemonic knowledge and practices in the community, like those informing the government of land resources (Bourdieu 1994:163, Ishihara and Pascual 2009). Indeed, ‘struggles over resources are, simultaneously, struggles over meaning’ (Hall et al. 2012: 166). As argued by a group of people from a dispossessed community in Sayaxché

They came to cheat us. “You should better sell your land plots before they get swamped under the Puebla to Panama Plan hydroelectric mega-dams”, they said. “The companies will provide employment and welfare that the state cannot”, they also told us. And they were not people from faraway places, not even the lawyers of the oil palm companies. They were brothers from neighboring communities!

Group meeting in March 2010

These corporate coyotes elaborate on actual class, gender, generational or any other power cleavage in the community to erode community consensus and/ or to reframe it. They understand that aforementioned socially differentiated subsistence minimums lead to multiple positionings within and among communities in the ideological and material distribution conflicts fuelled by changing land access and control relations. Broadly speaking, it is mainly Q’eqchi’ young, landless men who are often more enticed by “fast moneys” and status offered by sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses as a way to escape from their peasant parent’s “backwardness”. However, there are also those who would rather farm, pursue a different type of wage work or changed their mind after

²³ They include NGO employees, preachers, teachers, doctors, community leaders, local radio stations, traditional estates’ landlords/patrons, ranchers, mayors, corn traders, or civil servants.

realizing that ‘money goes as fast as it comes in petty things and one must leave the skin for that in the exploitative plantation work. It is not a good deal’ (interview with a group of young Q’eqchi’ men from Sayaxché village, June 2013). Conversely, Q’eqchi’ women of different ages and classes of labor are often the most active in mobilizing against their partners’, fathers’, or community’s participation in land deals. They usually act covertly and individually, as aforementioned, but sometimes they come together to push through gendered hierarchies in community government institutions and to stand out among the clearest and loudest voices against corporate coyotes (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011). *Building* new consensus through this symbolic power dispute is only half of the corporate coyotes’ job, though. The other half entails *mobilizing* the new consensus (Tarrow 1998: 175) among community members so they willingly sell their land for a better future. It is with this goal that coyotes elaborate on grievances around land unproductivity and its growing scarcity and raising prices, in the lack of wage work opportunities, the backwardness and drudgery of peasant life, or the children’s uncertain future to present sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses as ‘new development messiahs’ (interview with a field worker of the Social Pastoral of Petén in Sayaxché village, November 2009).

The case is that these ground-level corporate coyotes ‘coincide with the greater political power and have a hegemonic advantage [and thus] a preeminent position in crafting emergent dominant traditions’ (Sivaramakrishnan 2005: 350). As if in a strategic litigation process, coyotes are backed in their consensus building and mobilizing efforts by strong corporate investment in social communication (in different mass-media and in Q’eqchi’ language) and by a financially weaker but enticing discourse on corporate social responsibility.²⁴ Through the “Guatemalan Sugar Producers Association” (ASAZGUA) and the “Oil Palm Producers Guild” (GREPALMA) sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses are well represented in the powerful “Agricultural Chamber of Guatemala” and from there in the almighty “Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations” (CACIF). Tough-liner CACIF and its soft-liner “Guatemalan Development Foundation” (FUNDESA), together with other civil society think tanks and the Francisco Marroquín University are among the main ideologues framing the new extractivist accumulation and governmental project as *the* socially responsible and environmentally sustainable *national development* project. In fact, all of them sponsor and are part of the “Guatemalan Center for Corporate Social Responsibility” (CENTRA-RSE) and the “Guatemalan Association of Renewable Fuels” (ACRG).²⁵ ‘Who else would be willing to invest US\$ 50 million in this petty valley (*vallecito de pipiripau*)’ argued to the television cameras during the Polochic evictions Carlos Widdman, owner at that time of the Chabil Utzaj Polochic sugar mill, emphasizing later on that ‘we bring employment and wealth, how are they [Q’eqchi’ food growers] going to progress with those little maize plants (*maicitos*)?’ (Guatevisión May 29, 2011). Thus, anyone opposing these dominant assumptions is, to begin with, censured as anti-developmental, if not accused of being part of the ‘organizations promoting social conflictivity, violating the rule of law and discouraging private investment in Guatemala’ as it was titled a March 2012 research report for ‘the President of the Republic and governmental authorities in security, justice and energy development’ (Castillo Girón 2012) by a Francisco Marroquín University researcher. It is not striking, then, that the President framed “The Popular, Peasant and Indigenous March” petition on the moratorium of extractivist, land grabbing projects as “development projects led by private investors”.

²⁴ E.g., after a major protest by oil palm plantation workers in Sayaxché in May 2012, one of the main responses of the five oil palm companies operating there was to create, together with the village mayor, a local football team: “The Passion [River] Fury”.

²⁵ The number of such organizations should not be confused with large constituencies though. Among the Guatemalan oligarchy, companies and associations exceed “honorable” family names by far.

These are, in fact, the kind of discourses legitimating the second strategy deployed by dominant state and social actors in the making of extractivist governable spaces, namely, the “rule of law”. This apparently objective governmental principle in a democratic state framework is indeed subject to multiple interpretations within the current cycle of contention in Guatemala. Most often, it is used by dominant state and social actors to defend, in the media as in the courts, alleged rights as investors and status as owners of means of production. ‘Rule of Law’ is what the Widdmans claim when violently evicting hundreds of families in the Polochic area on March 2011 (Guatevisión May 29, 2011). And ‘rule of law and full government support for any investor’ is what the Guatemalan President offered in a business forum in Spain on February 2013.²⁶ It is very telling that in the same forum, thousands of Maya resisters to a hydroelectric mega-dam project by Spanish company Ecoener/ Hidralia Energía in the western highlands village of Santa Cruz Barillas were considered by the President as a ‘small group of radical environmentalists’ (*Prensa Libre* February 15, 2013). This is, arguably, not a casual designation. Recognizing resisters as Maya peoples would mean acknowledging them as subjects of collective rights to land and territory.

But this understanding of the “rule of law” is not only particular to the government. Even though the Guatemalan Constitution endows international human rights covenants, such as ILO 169 and the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights, with constitutional hierarchy, the Guatemalan Constitutional Court has not yet recognized the outcomes of 61 community consultations in good faith held throughout the country between May 2005 and March 2012. In all of them communities rejected almost unanimously different extractivist investment projects (Arriaza 2012). Rule of law meant “fast track” approval by the Guatemalan Congress of eight new laws on investment protection and labor flexibility supported by the CACIF on February 2013 while freezing the legal initiatives agreed-upon with “The Popular, Peasant and Indigenous March”. It means, overall, not only the discursive delegitimation but also the actual criminalization of the (constitutional) right to dissent and protest. The government has used the 1965 counter-insurgent “Decree 7” on “Preventive States of Emergency”, which do not need Congress’ approval, as long as they are shorter than fifteen days (Acuña 2012), to deploy military troops in villages where land grab-related conflicts scale up. National attorneys, for their part, have been dealing with disruptive collective action under the Anti-terrorist Bill and treating land occupations as penal offenses of “aggravated property usurpation”, resulting in dozens of peasant leaders put in jail (that is why these were among the main petitions of “The March” to state actors) (interview with a lawyer from the Association of Maya Lawyers, Guatemala City, June 5, 2013).

Furthermore, when enticing and regulatory tactics are insufficient to make subjects behave as they should, more drastic action is taken. As sarcastically argued by Li, ‘more authoritarian forms of government are often reserved for sections of a population deemed especially deficient and unable to exercise the *responsibility of freedom*’ (2005: 387, stressed added). Those resistant to enticing, legal dispossession tactics, or those involved in struggles in defense of territory are subject to intimidation, threatening and aggression. It is common for the land plots that peasants refuse to sell to end up enclosed by an agribusiness’ plantation, complicating or binding their right of way. Many of those refusing to sell are harassed and threatened by armed-bullies working as “private security” paratroops for the agribusinesses in ways like, ‘if you don’t sell at the price we are offering you, we will have to deal with the widow instead’ (Q’eqchi’ peasant testimony in a group meeting in a South Petén village, refuted by other participants, March 2008). Unfortunately, threats are fulfilled some times and many have been killed and/or disappeared after refusing to sell their land or when mobilizing against dispossession, for accessing to land or for re-possession.²⁷ In fact, violent evictions

²⁶ <http://www.nuevaeconomiaforum.org/pt/noticias/el-presidente-de-guatemala-invita-invertir-en-su-pais-y-garantiza-seguridad-juridica-los-inversores>, accessed on February 23, 2013.

²⁷ Exact figures are difficult to give. Press reports reported 11 peasants “killed in land conflicts” only between 2010 and June 2013. However many resisters are attacked (wounded or killed) in other moments and places

conducted by public security forces result in people's houses, crops and harvests being burnt down, many occupants badly injured and even killed. Estate, private and parastatal violence is, therefore, also constitutive of the multiple logics of power steering sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses' investment strategy.

Finally, it should be stated that if resistance is one side of the "survival coin" in the northern lowlands, and compliance is the other, joining criminal gangs, drug-traffickers' hitmen forces or the unregulated agribusinesses private security corps is the survival coin's border of growing despair and hopelessness. As put forward by Scott 'certain combinations of atomisation, terror, repression, and pressing material needs can indeed achieve the ultimate dream of domination: to have the dominated exploit each other' (1986: 30). Or attack each other. This is the case when, for instance, groups of landless people are convinced to evict similar groups from occupied lands or when generally poor, landless Q'eqchi' men agree (no matter whether more or less consciously) to be hired to intimidate, evict and/or attack fellow poor, landless Q'eqchi' resisters.

5 Conclusion

What started for many Q'eqchi' lowlanders as a (new) struggle for survival in the face of unfavorably changing land access and control relations has scaled up to a major cycle of contention in defense of territory. This grassroots-led strategic action frame emerges from widespread unrest from below and it is contending more than "large scale land acquisitions" (Deininger et al. 2011). What seems to be at stake within the current cycle of contention is the much feared by dominant state and oligarchic actors peoples' self-determination. Indeed, this is a surprisingly little widespread claim in a *de-facto* pluri-national context such as the Guatemalan²⁸.

But this is just wishful thinking since, if anything can be concluded, the politics of land grab-driven contemporary agrarian change in Guatemala are multiple and polifaceted as well as dynamic – "multiple and polifaceted" meaning that any effort aimed at understanding them will be incomplete without analyzing the practices of, and (inter)actions between, across and within multiple state and social actors either pushing for the new extractivist accumulation and governmental project, resisting it, complying with it (pragmatically or willingly), or operating at its violent margins. And "dynamic" meaning that such efforts in understanding are better focused on the mutually shaping interactions between structural dynamics and contending actors, that in forecasting definitive outcomes. Indeed, as advanced by Deleuze, 'processes are becomings, and aren't to be judged by some final result but by the way they proceed and their power to continue' (1995: 146 in Gregory et. al 2009: 745). Outcomes of contemporary agrarian change in Guatemala are, then, anything but a story foretold.

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than those of direct confrontation and registered (or not) as narco- or social violence-related casualties. A worker of the Social Pastoral of the Petén estimated in 'tens' the number of resisters (or related to) assassinated between 2004 and 2009 (workshop in Petén, November 2009).

²⁸ See Bastos inquiry about 'the (Lack of) Demand for Autonomy in Guatemala' (2008).

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The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

Contemporary land grab-driven agrarian change from a multiple politics perspective: Insights from Guatemala

Changing land access and control relations due to sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses land grabbing since the mid-2000s are a vector and an expression of a distinct and dominant extractivist accumulation and governmental project in Guatemala. State and social forces pushing for this project create and reproduce consenting subjects in their struggle for hegemony. But through expected and unexpected outcomes of both, success and failure in their original plans, they also constitute (new) rejections of particular forms of being exploited, oppressed or governed more broadly. Such unfavorably changing land access and control relations are a source of multiple grievances among Maya-Q'eqchi' lowlanders catalyzing the latter's unrest into concrete practices of resistance framed from below as "defense of territory". Their repertoire of contention includes 'everyday' and more militant forms of contention which are increasingly deployed as part of strategic litigations processes. For this, alliances are forged under problematic terms with national rural social movements, other social actors and even some state actors. Dominant extractivist state and social actors in contention, on their part, frame their governable space-making efforts as "developmental" and "ecologically and socially responsible", employing a repertoire based on "divide and win" and "rule of law" strategies articulated through discursive, regulatory and violent mechanisms. Indeed, land grab-driven agrarian change has triggered a new cycle of contention in Maya-Q'eqchi' populated northern lowlands. However, its outcomes are not a story foretold, but the becoming products of dynamic, multiple and polifaceted politics between, across and within diverse state and social actors in contention at different scales and places.



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