Land Rights and Stability in Indigenous Societies of Central America

A 3-5 year geographic research project of the University of Kansas (KU)
and the American Geographical Society (AGS)

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Goals and Activities

Struggles over land tenure and territorial sovereignty are common in municipalities where indigenous and *campesino* peoples live in Central America. Throughout the region, indigenous communities are working hard to gain collective ownership of their lands and to protect their natural and cultural heritage. Given that many of these agrarian populations have long suffered discrimination, land dispossession and poverty, how is it that some of them are thriving and protecting their lands, natural resources, and cultural identities?

We hypothesize that certain factors, such as environmental conservation, tourism, and local autonomy can bring cultural stability and associated benefits to these municipalities. Conversely, other factors may bring instability and conflicts, such as an active colonization front, certain commercial activities, or particular land ownership rights. To analyze these issues, the methods and techniques of human geography and cartography are essential. This project will use participatory research mapping (PRM) and publicly-available geographic information together with the tools of geographic information systems (GIS). The research will examine indigenous municipalities (defined by 40 percent or more indigenous language speakers) as the administrative and political level of spatial analysis.

Results and Benefits

Results will include digital maps of the indigenous municipalities and indigenous territorial jurisdictions (reserves, *comarcas*, autonomous regions, biosphere reserves, etc.) of Central America, as well as a reliable and compatible GIS database to analyze their "land stability" and related issues. Significantly, these maps will be designed to help the indigenous and state authorities with specific needs for cartographic information, including the development of web sites for dissemination of results.

The research team has decades of experience conducting applied geographic research in Central America that has helped indigenous and *campesino* populations in the region. The team will train in-country students, including those from the indigenous areas, in a collective research effort with all playing significant roles, including consensual decisions about database development and map design. The students will be repositories of geographic knowledge for future reference and applications, keeping the results accessible for their own populations.

Ethical Rules

This project underwent institutional review concerning human subjects by the US Department of Defense and the University of Kansas, and was approved by both. The researchers will follow the ethical principles and procedures for the protection of human subjects and communities as established by KU, AGS, and DoD. Rules include that the research must not adversely affect the people or natural environments of host countries, and that all sources of funding are made public. (For details, click http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/321602p.pdf for DoD, and http://www.amergeog.org/AGSethicalguidelines.pdf for AGS.)