

Guardians of the River: The power of narratives

Competing narratives are at the centre of the power struggle and conflict around the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River in Lenca territory that led to the murder of Berta Cáceres. The quotes, headlines, and examples here illustrate these competing narratives and the distinct worldviews, values, and interests they embody.

Dominant narratives

These examples (among many) highlight the framing, messaging, and underlying narratives that were mobilised to discredit, dehumanise, and criminalise COPINH and Berta Cáceres.

In April 2010, soon after a right-wing coup, the Honduran government held an international investment convention, “Honduras Is Open for Business”. The government relaxed the country’s mining regulations, repealed a moratorium on new mines, and granted 41 concessions for hydroelectric dams across the country.

On July 15, 2013, COPINH staged a peaceful protest at the dam company’s office that turned deadly. When soldiers opened fire on a peaceful COPINH protest against a new dam in 2015, killing community leader Tomás García and wounding his son, the Honduran national TV station blamed García’s death on COPINH: “Protesters from COPINH also have blood on their hands ... Members of COPINH should not have entered onto private property that was guarded by the army. The army provided security to the private company working on the hydroelectric dam.”

Aline Flores, from a Honduran business coalition, said publicly, “[COPINH] are invading us and making us look bad, hurting our international reputation.” The coalition denounced Berta for “impeding renewable energy projects ... with the support of Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission,” implying that these were not home-grown struggles but rather externally driven.

“DESA’s (Desarrollo Energetico Sociedad Autonomo) press statements claimed the community members violently entered the company compound, leading to Tomás García’s killing, and that the crowd then entered Cristian Madrid’s home and killed him. Milton Amaya Coello, commander of the First Battalion of Engineers, whose troops were stationed inside the DESA compound, echoed the company’s explanation of events. He claimed that, after entering the compound, three people then proceeded to attack the heavily armed soldiers with machetes, so Sergeant Jasser Sarabia fired in self-defense”.

Between 2013 and 2015, DESA used its influence to push the government to refocus policing and surveillance on COPINH and, particularly, on Berta. WhatsApp messages obtained by lawyers investigating the murder (GAIPE) revealed coordination between company executives, staff, security, police, and local officials to track and harass COPINH leaders. For example:

“I’m going to hire a sniper.”

“Pile a bunch of ‘indios’ in a car. Berta, Aureliano, and Tomás, 3 ring leaders... I’ve spent a lot of money and political capital to get these three arrest warrants.”

In September 2013, a magistrate ordered that Berta be held in pre-trial detention for “endangering the internal security of Honduras.”

FMO, the Dutch investment company that co-financed the construction of the Agua Zarca dam, posted a video about it on their website (removed after Berta’s murder), depicting the dam as a small-scale, people-centred, sustainable development project to benefit the community. They failed to mention the fact that the community had rejected the project, as is their right under ILO resolution 169.

After her murder, and against the evidence, the police initially blamed the murder on a COPINH leader. Mainstream Honduran media cast the incident as a “crime of passion” in the news and in the investigations.

Strategies to unmask the dominant narrative

These examples highlight some of COPINH’s strategies.

A [2013 protest](#) in Río Blanco, Honduras, exposed the corruption behind the project and called on allies to join the protest.

In 2015, Berta said: “I never doubted I would continue the struggle despite the threats; they even gave me more resolve. Today, we are receiving death threats not only against me but against other compañeros.”¹

In an interview with [The Guardian](#) in the same year, Berta asserted: “The political, economic, and social situation in Honduras is getting worse, and there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarization, of violation of human rights, of trans nationalisation, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to corporate capital, for it to privatise energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones.”²

1 Terra Justa, 2015

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/honduran-indigenous-rights-campaigner-wins-goldman-prize>

“It is not easy being a woman leading processes of indigenous resistance. In an incredibly patriarchal society, women are very exposed, we have to face high-risk circumstances, and sexist and misogynistic campaigns. This is one of the things that can most influence a decision to abandon the fight.” (Berta Cáceres, Open Global Rights).

COPINH radio stations broadcast regular updates to expose and counteract inflammatory and sexualized attacks on Berta by the company and the government, accusing her of being “a devil’s whore” and portraying COPINH as a terrorist organisation. Sectors of the Catholic Church joined in the attacks – a cardinal prohibited Catholics from joining COPINH or listening to its radio broadcasts – but these were countered by a prominent priest with public support, Padre Melo, on a popular radio station, Radio Progreso.³

Transformational narratives

“In our worldview, we are beings who come from the earth, the water, and the corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the rivers... [taught] that giving our lives in various ways to protect the rivers is to give our lives for the well-being of humanity and of this planet.”⁴ — Berta’s speech for the Goldman Environmental Prize in early 2015.

After she was murdered, COPINH and Berta’s daughters communicated hope and continuity. “Berta no se murió, Se multiplicó!” / “Berta did not die. She multiplied!”

³ Guardians of the River Case Study, Just Power: A Guide for Activists and Changemakers, JASS 2023

⁴ Berta Cáceres’s Goldman prize acceptance speech in 2015, [here](#).