

CASE STUDY COPINH



Guardians of the River in Honduras

COPINH – the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras/ *Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras* – was formed in 1993 and became a powerful grassroots movement with a vast global network of allies, acting in defense of ancestral lands, rivers, and culture. Then, in 2016, COPINH founder Berta Cáceres was assassinated. The international media framed this as the story of an individual hero – and Berta was truly an emblematic, inspirational, and brave leader – and yet the story of COPINH is both broader and ongoing, illustrating the many ways in which collective power challenges violent structures and systems, both public and personal.



COPINH emerged through organizing within the Lenca indigenous communities in Honduras to reclaim a shared cultural heritage and defend their rights and territory. It raised awareness, mobilized community action, conducted action research, and built diverse leadership and

networks. In all their direct action, members remained committed to nonviolence, solidarity, and collective leadership. Over time, COPINH grew to represent around 200 Lenca and rural communities, led by a 15-person council and backed by assemblies, land councils, and coordinators. Its community center, Utopia, has become a hub for strategy, rituals, training, and gatherings with allies.

Context

A history of deep inequities and violence has continuously reinforced itself in Honduras: corrupt entrenched elites, interrupted attempts at building democracy, US interventions, and the increasing power of organized criminal networks. A coup in 2009 overthrew a democratically elected president, which opened the way for accelerated land grabs and the dismantling of fledgling economic and environmental regulations and basic rights. The state intensified its repression of all forms of dissent and maximized business opportunities for elites and multinational corporations.

For several months after the 2009 coup, a broad-based movement emerged across Honduras to protest the illegitimate regime. The US government used 'diplomacy' and military force to 'stabilize' Honduras, consolidate the post-coup regime, and undermine demands for a return to constitutional order. After coup-sponsored elections in November 2009 – boycotted by the opposition and denounced internationally – the new government made national resources available to largely unregulated ventures in energy, tourism, and agro-industry.

Organizations such as COPINH and activists including Berta faced increasing risk and hostility in the 2010s as they confronted corrupt and often illegal moves to take over

land and natural resources. Infiltration, attacks, and violent repression of defenders followed. Meanwhile, the US government's war on drugs had limited Colombian shipping and air routes, and this drove narco-trafficking overland, transforming Honduras into a narco-state. The Honduran authorities used the growing insecurity to further justify crackdowns and expand US military presence (12 US military installations around the country by 2014).

Honduras became one of the most violent countries in the world: number one in homicides per capita² and the most dangerous place to be an environmental activist³. Aggressive strategies dismantled regulations, privatized public services, and gave power to extractive companies working in partnership with local elites, corrupt state officials, and organized crime. Amid increased inequality and the seizure of resources from indigenous and rural communities, grassroots organizations and their allies continued to resist and expose corruption and rights violations from the local to the global level.

Indigenous feminist leadership

Berta Cáceres and her colleagues set out in the early 1990s to organize indigenous Lenca farming communities in defense of their land and resources. Then as now, COPINH developed local and democratic leadership through a mix of popular education and indigenous practices.

¹ Adapted from a longer piece written by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller with Laura Carlsen for JASS.

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-honduras-homicides-idUSBREA1G1E520140217>

³ Dangers for community and environmental activists skyrocketed, over 100 being killed between 2010 and 2014.

While her approach focused on collective organizing, Berta also became a visionary feminist. She believed that patriarchy was as violent and destructive as the extractive capitalism and racism the Lenca community faced. She experienced directly the ways that gender inequality and violence in families, relationships, and movements created rifts, marginalized women, and,



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. 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.” Berta Cáceres⁴

potentially, made everyone vulnerable to gossip, distrust, and divide-and-conquer tactics.

Berta helped COPINH to walk the talk – from increasing women’s leadership in COPINH’s structures and decisions, to ensuring that men and women played equal roles in daily tasks, to designating an LGBTQ coordinator to combat homophobia. In the last ten years of her life, Berta’s explicitly feminist, intersectional analysis influenced other indigenous, rural, and campesino movements in Honduras and around the world.



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

The Agua Zarca struggle

Early in the 2000s, a local community assembly, supported by COPINH, voted against a hydroelectric project on the Gualcarque River on Lenca ancestral land, stating that it would “jeopardize their water resources and livelihoods.” After the 2009 coup, however, the Honduran government gave permission to a private-sector energy company called DESA (Desarollo Energetico) – involving influential Honduran figures, a Chinese dam-building company, Sinohydro, and international investors – to conduct a feasibility study on the Gualcarque River, bypassing the legally required community consultation.

In 2011, when DESA began constructing roads, the community resisted. DESA officials promised jobs, schools, and scholarships and offered to buy people’s land, but community members remained unconvinced. COPINH organized protests and mobilized other communities along the river to join the struggle. DESA hired armed security, including ex-soldiers, to guard the construction.

Under attack for defending its land and rights, COPINH called for international support to stop the project and presented official complaints to the national Special Prosecutor’s Office for Indigenous Peoples (Fiscalía de Etnia). The company’s security targeted COPINH members and Berta began receiving death threats. When in 2013 the company destroyed people’s food crops with bulldozers and tractors, communities began to set up roadblocks. DESA sent in more men and bulldozers, tearing down homes. Enraged and distressed, more community members joined in the resistance.

In addition to organizing at home, Berta traveled to the US, Canada, and Europe, building relationships with influential decisionmakers, religious leaders, NGOs,

⁴ Goldman speech 2015.

and movements on every continent. She attended environmental conferences, engaged with the media, and spoke with officials in foreign ministries, international financial institutions, and development banks, encouraging international allies to raise the visibility of COPINH's demands and to pledge financial support.

Meanwhile, COPINH radio stations broadcast regular updates, highlighting the role of the communities in defending rights. Social-media campaigns exposed and counteracted inflammatory, sexualized, and polarizing attacks on Berta from DESA, the government, and elements in the Catholic Church.

The conflict escalated. DESA accused the community of trespassing and being "anti-development," denouncing Berta and COPINH in the national media. Police dismantled the COPINH roadblocks, COPINH rebuilt them, and the government deployed the military. Berta and a colleague were arrested and held on fabricated charges, and the government imposed a travel ban on Berta. She used her release to amplify visibility with a media event. An international human rights delegation visited the site and, in a letter to Sinohydro, verified that DESA and the Honduran Armed Forces were systematically harassing the community. When COPINH held a peaceful protest at the dam's offices, soldiers opened fire on the crowd, killing Tomas Garcia, a COPINH leader. In the face of bad publicity, Sinohydro pulled out of the dam project, marking COPINH's first major victory.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, community protests continued, intimidation increased, and death threats mounted. An army whistleblower confirmed⁵ that Berta's

name was on an army hitlist months before her murder. In 2015, Berta and COPINH received the Goldman Environmental prize, catapulting the Lenca struggle onto the world stage. Many supporters hoped that raising Berta's profile as an internationally recognized environmental leader would provide better protection, but others worried that the singling out a 'hero', plus the prize money, would exacerbate community conflicts and power struggles within the movement.

Berta spent the morning of March 2, 2016 in a workshop on economic alternatives. In the afternoon, she met a colleague⁶ to discuss healing workshops for women human rights defenders⁷. Just before midnight, armed hitmen broke into Berta's house and killed her.

Berta Cáceres's legacy

After Berta's assassination, COPINH and its allies in solidarity networks organized massive international demonstrations in dozens of cities. Media campaigns put pressure on the Honduran government to investigate the crime and bring the assassins to justice. Signs reading "*Berta did not die, she multiplied*" could be seen from Jakarta to New York City.

To deflect attention, the Honduran government confiscated COPINH documents and arrested COPINH members as 'suspects.' But organizations and advocates – human-rights, environmental, indigenous, and feminist – pressed for an in-depth investigation and demanded that international investors withdraw funding for the dam project. The end of 2016 saw a small win. Under the pressure of lobbying and advocacy, guided by COPINH research and communications, international investors withdrew financing for the dam project.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/21/bertha-caceres-name-honduran-military-hitlist-former-soldier>

⁶ Daisy Flores. JASS-Honduras

⁷ The Women Human Rights Defenders Network in Honduras is part of the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative, which was co-created by JASS, Consorcio Oaxaca, AWID, Colectiva Feminista and others. The Honduras network is comprised of indigenous, rural, LGBTQ activists and feminists

Construction was suspended by December of 2016, at least temporarily.

In December 2019, the Honduran court sentenced seven men for the assassination of Berta Cáceres, among them company hitmen and Honduran military personnel trained by the US. Berta's family and organization combined independent investigation with legal action and political pressure to demand the prosecution of



For Lenca people, of course [the assassination] was a terrible blow, but that's why we say that Berta has multiplied, because the communities continue in the process, with all their obstacles and problems, confronting the challenges on a daily basis, and in this sense, the whole emancipatory project that our compañera Berta Cáceres built is still being carried out." Bertha Zúñiga Cáceres, COPINH coordinator

those behind the crime as well, and, in 2021 David Castillo, former DESA president and US-trained army intelligence officer, was found guilty of collaborating in Berta's murder.

Berta's teachings have taken root in others, including her daughters, Bertha and Laura Zúñiga, and her legacy lives on in the continued work of COPINH – an example for indigenous, campesino, and feminist organizing everywhere.

Multiple strategies for change

COPINH is notable for its multi-pronged and nuanced organizing strategies over the years.

Building shared sense of Lenca identity, belonging, history and worldview, COPINH:

- established a Center of Healing and Justice for survivors of domestic abuse;
- encouraged spiritual growth and community unity through women-led rituals, ceremonial fires, songs, dances, and solidarity-inspiring tributes to ancestors.

Fostering collective power and diverse leadership, COPINH:

- built the capacity of community members to speak out, deal with internal conflicts, and remain united;
- trained dozens of community coordinators, organizers, teachers, and nurses in political education;
- held women's leadership courses to confront machismo and family violence;
- broadened the participation and leadership of women and LGBTQ representatives (pioneering at the time).

Engaged and mobilized around visible power to make indigenous rights real in people's lives, COPINH:

- established two indigenous municipalities (an unprecedented victory);
- obtained public funding for health centers and schools in Lenca areas;
- in alliance with other indigenous organizations, successfully lobbied the Honduran government to ratify ILO Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous People, including the Right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent by Indigenous Communities for projects affecting them;
- used a combination of mobilization and advocacy to gain community and individual title to land;
- lobbied the international financial institutions and US Congress to challenge global policy that facilitated militarization, violence, and land grabs.

Challenging dominant narratives and created their own, COPINH:

- created a network of five village radio stations;
- collaborated with indigenous peoples around the world to challenge dominant worldviews and promote cosmovision centered around harmonious relationship between people and the earth.

Exposing and resisting state capture and corruption, COPINH:

- developed comprehensive plans to engage, expose and confront the state, corporations, and oligarchs;
- mobilized numerous protests and global campaigns to challenge land grabs and development as economic growth.



One of the ways that the memory [of my mami] has inspired us is the leadership of women: how we can take on the struggles, how we can lead processes that imply rebelling against these companies, but also learning to dream a common dream."

Laura Zúñiga, COPINH⁸

⁸ Interview with Laura Zúñiga Cáceres, Hecho en América, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mktzkud7FPI&t=4511s>