

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 22





Chestnut tree

The experience of the Tacana II indigenous territory and its organization, in the heart of the Bolivian Amazon, is a faithful testimony of possibilities to defend its vision of development in the face of the threats of extractivism. It is a resistance with dialogue and proposal, asserting their rights, negotiating the coexistence with different logics of development.

WHAT DEVELOPMENT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Gathering economy and well being in the Amazon

We are visiting the Tacana II indigenous territory, in the heart of the Bolivian Amazon. There are about 250 Tacana families living in four communities. The TCO (Community Land of Origin) covers an area of approximately 360,000 hectares. The territory is located in the extreme north of the department of La Paz, separated by the river Madre de Dios from the department of Pando and bordering on its south-western side with the republic of Peru. The communities were formed by the need to organize and defend the territory since 15 or 20 years ago and have achieved a legal recognition from the State; before this, the Tacana families lived in a more dispersed way. The process of legal recognition of their territory has been hindered for several years by different political and bureaucratic reasons, despite many efforts by its organization, the "Regional Indigenous Central Madre de Dios (CITRMD)", which represents this territory.

Edgar García, co-founder of the organization and its current vice president explains: "The families of my community (Las Mercedes), like the other three communities in the territory (Puerto Perez, Toromonas and El Tigre) live mainly from the chestnut harvest". These are wild trees that reach a height of 25 to 50 meters, with a very high density in the forests of the TCO. The communities have assigned areas of use of the chestnut to each family in order to manage the territory. "There are families that have up to 2,000 chestnut trees, the least having 300", explains Edgar.



Chestnutshells

The chestnut harvest begins in December and lasts often until the end of April. During this period, the families live predominantly in temporary shelters near the collection points, which at the same time serve as storage places for the collected fruits. Usually, the collection points are in the immediate vicinity of a river, since

the water courses are the only transport routes in the Amazon. Collecting the nuts is a pretty arduous work because the time of the harvest coincides with the rainy season. The chestnut grows on trees, which often reach an altitude of up to 50 meters. Therefore, only the fallen fruits are picked up. Looking for nuts under the trees

is, however, a dangerous work, since the hard-shelled fruits gradually fall. The chestnuts are similar to a coconut; the hard shell is opened with a knife. Each nut contains several fruits, which are also surrounded by a hard shell. The harvested quantity depends on the flower development of the trees. In a normal harvest, the families collect 30 to 50 kilos per tree. The trees are distributed over the forest, so it is a lot of work to carry the collected nuts to the collection point. Where possible, the heavy crates are transported by motorcycle. But often the terrain does not allow the use of a vehicle, so the nuts (with a weight of up to 90 kilos) have to be carried outthrough the forest in marches that can last hours. During the rainy season, parts of the territory are also submerged; there it can only be harvested when the land dries out.

In the Payol -as the Tacana call the collecting point- the harvested nuts are first dried. Then the whole harvest is loaded into small boats and transported over the Madre de Dios river, one of the largest affluents of the Amazon, to Riberalta for more than 300 kilometers. In order to achieve a stable and interesting price, the Tacana families have begun to undergo a certification process



Collection point during the harvest



which tests compliance with environmental standards. A large portion of the chestnut ends up in European markets.

Prosperity, but not at the cost of nature

The chestnut harvest is an arduous work, and so are the significant investments needed for the collection (food, boat, fuel, motor, motorcycle, collection center arrangement, among others), families obtain comparatively higher incomes than the average rural population in the country. For purposes of subsistence, families are also engaged in hunting, fishing and farming in small plots for their own consumption, always taking care not to overexploit existing resources. There are internal regulations to prohibit the use of fishing nets. All the inhabitants of the territory live of the chestnut, but

its harvest does not cause any damage; on the contrary, families recognize the value of their trees, declared by law national heritage and do everything to protect them from any harm. Very few people in the communities also participate in the exploitation of alluvial gold, by means of floating dredgers in the rivers.

The threat of progress: harvest does not fit with conventional agriculture

In the 1980s, oil and gas explorations were carried out in the territory. Justino Peñalosa, 92 years old, the oldest in the community Las Mercedes, recalls: "The animals affected by the exploration activities returned only after 5 to 10 years". However, there is much more damage in the long run. During a walk from the community "Las Mercedes" to "Puerto Suarez" the

The entire Tacana population of the territory lives from the chestnut harvest. Since they only pick up and sell the fallen fruits, there is no harm to nature. The families see the chestnut as base of their existence.

Chestnut before shipping

degradation of the forest vegetation and the breaches that were opened more than thirty years ago are easily identified. The community says that as a result of the seismic detonations for exploration along the forest, the soil filled with wetlands that over time caused the death of the chestnut trees that are very susceptible to moisture.

"Since we settled here in Las Mercedes, we have had to combat the illegal extraction of wood by companies several times", says Edgar, "and we have forbidden the chestnut ga-

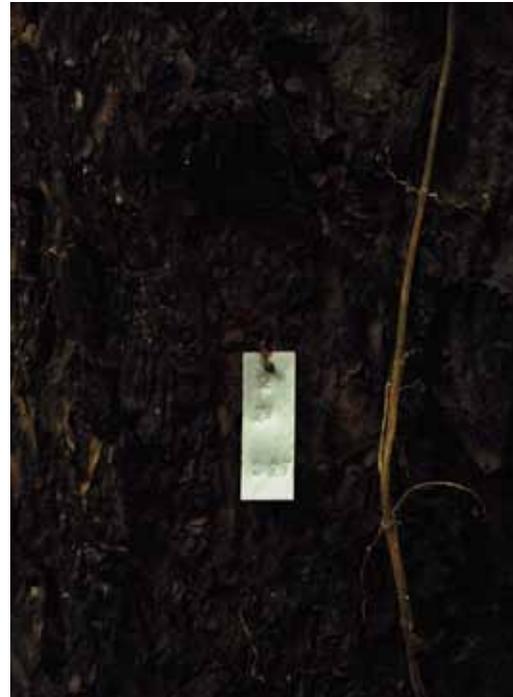
thering by people outside the territory". Rolando Salvatierra, a member of the board of directors of the community Puerto Perez adds: "On three occasions we were forced to prevent families from the interior of the country to take possession of land within the territory". For the four communities, it is a huge challenge to protect their territory against the interests of others. The chestnut trees in the territory now have small labels indicating which family they correspond to; at the same time they serve to count the total amount of chestnut trees in the TCO (around 50 000).

«We feel threatened»

In 2013, a new threat for the Tacana families began, as the Bolivian State through the Ministry of Hydrocarbons and Energy and the state company YPFB, decided to resume the gas exploration in the territory. Justino Peñalosa expresses his concern about the plans for extractivism: "The project hurts me; I have already lived one exploration project and I know that our resources, the flora, fauna and particularly the chestnut tree are in danger". Families



Chestnut tree with a label



«The gathering activity does not fit the conventional agricultural logic» explains Alcides Vadillo, who works in the institution that advises the territorial organization in the defense of their rights. “For conventional farmers, agrobusiness and some authorities the territories of collection are unproductive lands”. Although there is no road to the territory (this appears in future state plans), the developmental pressure on the territory is evident.



A villager of Puerto Suárez expresses his concerns

have doubts as to how seismic testing affects and impacts the resources of the territory and mainly their base of existence, the chestnut trees. The effects of the trees during the first exploration years ago, are very present in the imaginary of the locals. "

Clash of development logics: we are not against progress; but we demand our rights to be respected

For the people of Chive, the small town across the river in front of the TCO, where the Tacana families buy their supplies, the exploration and extraction of gas in the territory means development. The Chinese company hired by YPF to carry out the exploration work, has its camp here. The Tacana's defense of natural resources is detrimental to them. The economy of the place is linked to the chestnut harvest but apparently, there is not much awareness of this. For the owner of the biggest store in the town, one thing is clear: "The Tacanas are hindering progress". The habitants of the territory think differently. "We are not against the gas exploration," explains the vice president of the Tacana organization, "but we demand that our rights to be respected since our base of existence is at

stake". 51,000 chestnut trees are found in the territory, 1,200 of them are located directly on the planned seismic testing area and 52% of the surface covered by the seismic exploration project is within the TCO. The completion of a study for the seismic exploration project carried out by an entity contracted by YPF coincided with the harvest season, which is why most of the families did not participate. The subsistence plans developed by the communities supported by experts have an inventory of the territory in terms of possible areas use (chestnut, fishing, hunting, medicinal plants, areas with tourism potential, lagoons, high forest, etc.). These valuable spaces have also not been taken into account by the gas exploration project.

Our base of existence is on stake

The organization, strengthened by the threat of its base of existence, has achieved important agreements in the defense of its interests: Seismic tests cannot be carried out under any circumstances at a distance of less than 35 meters from the chestnut trees. During the season of the chestnut harvest (January to late April) no seismic exploration activity project can find place in the TCO. The permanence of the exploration company in the territory will be accompanied and monitored by environmen-

tal monitors (women and men), all community members of the TCO. But there are other points yet to be met by the ministry and / or YPF. The Tacana organization requires a baseline study to check possible impacts. The detonations do not only generate disturbances in the fauna, the main protein source of the population, but they may lead to water contamination, affecting the fishing activities. Another problem is the soil compaction with unknown consequences for the flora and particularly for the chestnut. Helicopter operations, within the framework of exploration activities, must be carried out at a height sufficient not to affect the flowering process of the trees. There are many other topics that generate uncertainty in the families, whose basis of existence is at stake.

In future negotiations, the families want to achieve the application of all environmental requirements agreed in the official and legally binding documents. In other indigenous territories, the representatives of the state have an easy game because they do not know their rights or the possible effects that are usually caused by megaprojects, road construction and extractive industries.



Villagers of Las Mercedes during one of the many meetings on the topic of natural gas exploration and exploitation in the territory.

Dialogic resistance– the pulse of the territory

"It all started with the visit of a state delegation to the territory, where public officials told us about the possibility that our communities benefit from a drinking water state program",

recalls Edgar Garcia. Later on, visitors no longer touched this topic. Today the communities perceive little sincerity in the discourse of those who come, announcing progress and modernity. Communities are tired of so many meetings and it seems to be a strategy of YPF to play to the tiredness of the community leaders. For the ministry and the state enterprise they are



Root area of a chestnut tree

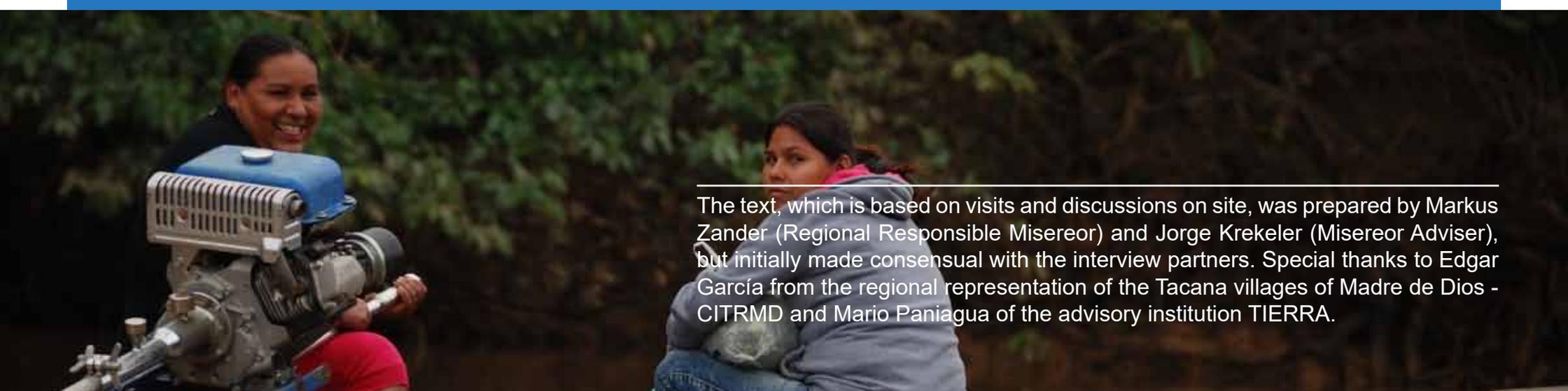
indigenous communities with few resources who do not understand the goodness of extractivism. Marta Bascopé, president of the village council in Las Mercedes, said: "We have negotiated an agreement. Now it is important to pay attention to its compliance. We are concerned about our rights. "What for some people is just an unproductive land, represents for us our subsistence".

We will not participate in the destruction of the forest

Marta indicates that women are very aware of the possible consequences of the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons. "Men are more tempted by the payment of compensation". But Rolando Salvatierra makes clear: "The compensation that the state offered us at the beginning of the negotiations is a bad joke. Half a million dollars are not even enough to compensate the revenues of only one chestnut harvest in the territory". There is no lack of attempts to soften the critical position of territorial organization, to divide the bases. Technicians and lawyers who worked for years alongside indigenous organizations have been hired by YPFB. It seems that the voice of a community expresses what the majority thinks: "We will not participate in the destruction of the forest".

Messages to the future

- The main interest is not to discuss the payment of a compensation, but to analyze and identify possible damages and seek their reduction to the minimum possible: extractivism and apparent modernity versus gathering economy and territorial identity.
- It is an emblematic example in which indigenous people do not move away from their own understanding of progress, use dialogue to negotiate conditions and demand respect for their rights.
- The offer to indigenous women to “be able to wash the worker’s’ overalls” does not provoke the interest of women, but it does show the blindness of some to other logics of development.

A photograph showing two women in a rural, outdoor setting. The woman on the left is smiling and holding a blue and silver engine, possibly a generator or pump. The woman on the right is sitting and looking towards the camera. The background is a dense, green forest.

The text, which is based on visits and discussions on site, was prepared by Markus Zander (Regional Responsible Misereor) and Jorge Krekeler (Misereor Adviser), but initially made consensual with the interview partners. Special thanks to Edgar García from the regional representation of the Tacana villages of Madre de Dios - CITRMD and Mario Paniagua of the advisory institution TIERRA.

Almanac to the Future

STORIES OF SUCCES

www.almanaquedelfuturo.wordpress.com

Original title “¿De qué desarrollo estamos hablando?”

Experiencia Motivadora N° 22 Almanaque del Futuro

Authors: Markus Zander (Regional Responsible Misereor)
and Jorge Krekeler Misereor Adviser (jorge.krekeler@scbbs.net)

Translation: Samuel Suárez

Layout: Diana Patricia Montealegre

Images: Markus Zander

Contact to the Story of Success:

Mario Paniagua, email: m.paniagua@ftierra.org and

Alcides Vadillo, email: a.vadillo@ftierra.org

Edition: March 2017

Text and photos may be used in printed and online publications, with approval of the author and the photographer. Reproduction or reprint of shortened versions only in consultation with the author.

With support of:

MISEREOR
IHR HILFSWERK