

Wolfgang Gabbert

# Indigenous Rights, Natural Resources and the State

The Intricacies of Sustainable  
Development in Middle America

ISH-Arbeitspapier  
des Instituts für Soziologie der Leibniz Universität Hannover

01-2018

ISH-Working Paper  
Institute of Sociology, Leibniz University Hannover

Die Arbeitspapiere des Instituts für Soziologie der Leibniz Universität Hannover werden nur eingeschränkt begutachtet. Sie dienen der Verbreitung aktueller Forschungsergebnisse im Vorfeld einer späteren wissenschaftlichen Publikation und sind nicht mit einer Veröffentlichung gleichzusetzen. Die in den Arbeitspapieren geäußerten Meinungen und Ansichten sind die der Autorinnen bzw. Autoren und entsprechen nicht zwangsweise denen des Instituts oder dessen Vertreterinnen und Vertretern.

© Die Urheberrechte liegen bei den Autorinnen bzw. Autoren.

Working papers of the Institute of Sociology at the Leibniz University Hannover undergo a limited review process. The papers' purpose is the dissemination of current research results prior to a publication. They, therefore, do not substitute scientific publications. Views or opinions expressed in working papers are attributable to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the institute or its representatives.

© Copyright is held by the authors.

Leibniz Universität Hannover  
Institut für Soziologie  
Schneiderberg 50  
30167 Hannover

<http://www.ish.uni-hannover.de>

## Abstract

While many governments of Third World\* states have recognized indigenous people's autonomy rights and accepted sustainability as a development goal in international agreements, national constitutions and laws, actual policies often contradict both aims. Biological resources are considered primarily as usable goods to be deployed to their maximum. Consequently, the control of indigenous lands is often disputed by states and private interests and policies still foster economic models based on the exploitation of natural resources for exportation. With its particular rich biodiversity, extended forest areas and the presence of various indigenous groups, Middle America is a particular interesting example of the abovementioned general trends. Mega-projects of roads, ports, mining, tourist centres, and export agriculture are causing serious environmental damage and threaten indigenous land rights.

Political and academic discussions of sustainability do often pay insufficient attention to social structure and power relations. While "indigenous" or "traditional" resource management systems (such as communal land holding) are frequently considered particularly sustainable, this is not necessarily the case. The latter quality is not due to some essence or world view indissolubly linked to a certain kind of people but to non-capitalist forms of production that aim at satisfying subsistence needs and not accumulation.

\*I prefer this term compared to "Global South" or "developing countries" since it alludes to the third estate in pre-revolutionary France thus highlighting the politically dependent and economically disadvantaged status of the countries.

## Author

*Wolfgang Gabbert* ist Leiter des Arbeitsbereichs Kulturanthropologie und Weltgesellschaft am Institut für Soziologie der Leibniz Universität Hannover.

E-Mail: [w.gabbert@ish.uni-hannover.de](mailto:w.gabbert@ish.uni-hannover.de)

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Volker Wunderich, Ute Schüren and Sebastian Mathes for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## Content

1	Introduction .....	4
2	Government policies in Middle America – between capitalist integration and the recognition of indigenous rights .....	5
3	Indigenous groups and sustainable development – examples from the Atlantic Coast regions of Nicaragua and Panama .....	10
4	Conclusion .....	13

# 1 Introduction

In Latin America we are faced with competing claims of indigenous populations and the respective national governments for land rights and the control and use of other natural resources. In addition to this, as in most post-colonial societies, indigenous populations are of critical importance in the debate about sustainable development at least in three respects:

1. Discussions about the conservation of the environment, and particularly on the prevention of global warming are closely linked to indigenous people since they inhabit much of the world's remaining forest areas highly esteemed for their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide. Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, hold 23.5 % of the global forest area. Middle America (Mexico and the Central American countries Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama) alone holds 8.8%.<sup>1</sup> Around half of Latin America's indigenous population lives in tropical forest areas.<sup>2</sup>

2. Indigenous populations generally belong to the poorest groups in the countries where they reside.<sup>3</sup> In addition to many other social and ecological hazards, many live in areas that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of global warming, think, for example, of coastal wetlands, mangroves, coral reefs, etc. in the tropics. As Anderson et al. highlight in their study on biodiversity and climate change in Middle America, "a small temperature increase [in these areas] could in fact be devastating [since] the species and ecosystems have become accustomed to low temperature variability".<sup>4</sup> They conclude:

"[S]hould worst case scenario conditions prevail, by the 2020s, the Caribbean coasts of Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, will be significantly impacted by climate change. By the 2080s, all of the ecosystems and species of Central America and the Dominican Republic may be subjected to conditions well outside of their traditional comfort zone."<sup>5</sup>

3. Indigenous people have frequently been portrayed as "natural conservationists"<sup>6</sup> and particularly apt for the stewardship of natural resources for their alleged close relationship to "pacha mama" or Mother Nature in Latin America and beyond. Recently the concept of "buen vivir" or "good life" with roots in indigenous world views has aroused wide interest as a possible guidance to direct our thinking about sustainable development. A recent study of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, states:

---

<sup>1</sup> Data refer to 2010 (FAO 2013:7). "It is estimated that carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) caused by inappropriate forest management is responsible for around 17 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions" (FAO 2013:3).

<sup>2</sup> FAO (2013:9).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., FAO (2013:9).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson et al. (2008:98).

<sup>5</sup> Anderson et al. (2008:89).

<sup>6</sup> Cf., for example, Ross and Pickering (2002) and the Kuna and Mayangna (Sumu) self-image (Sandner Le Gall 2007:184; McLean 2012:472).

"As in the rest of Latin America, forest areas or ecosystems rich in biodiversity in Mesoamerican [sic] tend to coincide with the presence of indigenous peoples who, in general, carry out sustainable and integrated management of natural resources."<sup>7</sup>

With its particular rich biodiversity, the presence of various indigenous groups and state policies mostly fostering the exploitation of natural resources as an economic strategy, Middle America is a particular interesting example of more general trends. In the following, I will first describe Middle American state policies related to development, resources and indigenous rights. Second, I will sketch the situation in the Atlantic coast regions of Nicaragua and Panama as an example for the intricacy of the relationship between indigenous groups, resource use and sustainable development.

## 2 Government policies in Middle America – between capitalist integration and the recognition of indigenous rights

In the past three decades we have witnessed contradictory developments in Latin America and beyond: On the one hand, many countries have begun to establish protected areas and biosphere reserves, frequently in indigenous territories. Protected areas make up more than 25% of the national territory in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama, for example.<sup>8</sup> Governments also started to experiment with community forestry, Payment for Ecological Services (PES) and forestry incentive mechanisms since the 1980s, to foster conservation and the sustainable use of the forests as well as reducing poverty.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous demands for rights to land and autonomy have been supported by international organizations such as the UN, the ILO or the World Bank. They are also reflected in numerous international conventions such as the recent United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which states in Article 26:

"1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.

2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired.

---

<sup>7</sup> FAO (2013:vii); see also Varese (1996). This position is critically examined in Ruddle (1994) and Sandner Le Gall (2007:69-71). Mesoamerica refers to a culture area extending from central Mexico to the northwest of Costa Rica. It includes Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and the western and central parts of Honduras and Nicaragua but not their Atlantic lowlands.

<sup>8</sup> FAO (2013:24-26).

<sup>9</sup> FAO (2013:vii, 3).

3. States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned."<sup>10</sup>

Constitutional reforms were adopted in many countries that recognize the multicultural and ethnically diverse character of the nation and the indigenous rights to autonomy and resources.<sup>11</sup> Some progress has also been made in securing indigenous land tenure by demarcation and land titling programmes.<sup>12</sup> Panama, for example, had recognized five indigenous territories covering 22 % of the national territory up until 2010. In the Atlantic coast region of Nicaragua indigenous and Afro-descendant communities had received titles over almost 37,813 km<sup>2</sup> until 2017 which corresponds to 31.6 % of the national territory.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, indigenous people are facing what can be called a "third conquest" in recent decades. The first conquest in the sixteenth century led to the political and economic subjugation of Latin America's aboriginal population by the Iberian conquerors particularly in the densely settled areas of pre-Columbian states and empires in Mesoamerica and the Andes and the displacement of others. A second conquest occurred in the nineteenth century when indigenous lands were alienated and converted into large estates for the production of crops for exportation, such as coffee, bananas or henequen. As a result, indigenous groups were pushed back farther into marginal regions such as rugged mountain areas or the tropical lowlands considered unfit for economic exploitation at that time. In Central America the bulk of the indigenous populations are located in the coastal lowlands of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (El Salvador and Guatemala being exceptions).<sup>14</sup> These areas are ecologically extremely valuable for their extended coral reefs and seagrass meadows, estuaries, lagoons, and mangrove forests, as well as their vast tropical forest stands and tremendous diversity of plant as well as terrestrial and marine animal species.<sup>15</sup> Due to the renaissance of economic development models based on the exportation of natural resources, fostered by the commodity price boom of the early 21st century, these areas have increasingly attracted the attention of national governments, private entrepreneurs and transnational corporations in the last decades heralding a third conquest. Rich deposits of oil, gold and other minerals are suspected

---

<sup>10</sup>United Nations (2007).

<sup>11</sup>Guatemala 1985, Nicaragua 1986, Brazil 1988, Columbia 1991, Paraguay 1992, Mexico 1992 and 2001, Peru 1993, Argentine 1994, Bolivian 1994, Ecuador 1983 and 1998. See, for example, Assies (1999); Van Cott (2000b:207-208); Cabedo Mallol (2004:143-280).

<sup>12</sup>FAO (2013:21-24); see González (2012) for Nicaragua.

<sup>13</sup>FAO (2013:12, 14); Finley-Brook (2012a:394-395); Sequeira Rankin, Figueroa, González and Barbeyto (2017:1, 4).

<sup>14</sup>However, Nicaragua's Pacific and central parts witnessed processes of ethnic recategorization in recent decades. Thus, more than 100,000 people identified themselves as Chorotega-Nahua-Mange, Naho-Nicarao, Xiu-Sutiava and Cacaopera-Matagalpa in the 2005 census (INEC 2006:40-41).

<sup>15</sup>See, e.g., Sandner Le Gall (2007:37); Anderson et al. (2008).

here or are already exploited. The forest areas do not only promise timber, precious woods and other products but are also particularly rich in their biodiversity.<sup>16</sup>

Middle America is of particular interest for the discussion of sustainable development for several reasons: First, the region is one of the "world's top twenty-five biodiversity hotspots teeming with globally significant biological diversity". Here, "nearly 8% of the world's terrestrial species are found on less than 1% of earth's landmass."<sup>17</sup> The Department of Cabo Gracias a Dios (Mosquitia) in Honduras, for example, holds 80% of the country's animal and plant species.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the indigenous areas include important fresh water resources.

Second, the region is also of strategic importance for the international trade relations since here only a landmass of less than a hundred kilometres in its narrowest parts separates the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Thus, coastal regions and indigenous settlement areas are particularly affected by major development initiatives promoted by the national governments and international organizations.

In the context of the United States project to extend the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include all of the Americas, the heads of state of Mexico and all Central American countries agreed to launch the so-called Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) in June 2001. This is a regional development initiative with a multi-billion dollar budget financed by the governments and international donors (e.g., the Inter-American Development Bank, IDB). It is centred around trade facilitation and massive infrastructure projects such as the creation of an international Mesoamerican highway system, the integration of regional power supply systems (SIECAM), the creation of a regional energy market, the construction of hydroelectric dams, pipelines and investments in telecommunications (Mesoamerican Information Highway). A major component is the construction of "dry canals" (deep-water ports connected by high-speed rail links and new highways)<sup>19</sup> as alternatives to the Panama Canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to reduce distance and save costs in the trade between the US East Coast, where most of the manufacturing takes place, and the West Coast as well as with Asia.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>See, e.g. Sinnott, Nash, De la Torre (2010:5-12); Finley-Brook (2012b). 75 percent of the country's forests are located on the territory of peasant ejidos or indigenous communities in Mexico, for example (FAO 2013:19).

<sup>17</sup>Anderson et al. (2008:89). "Despite its small surface area, around 1% of the world, Central America is one of the most biodiverse areas of the planet, representing 7% of the world's biodiversity (INBio, 2004). The countries of the Central American subregion have a territory with great geological, geographic, climatic and biotic diversity. Guatemala, for example, has 14 terrestrial ecoregions with different ecosystems, more than 200 fluvial and terrestrial ecological systems and around 15,000 different flora species and 100,000 fauna species (MARN, 2009). Costa Rica, in turn, has 94,753 known species, 5% of the biodiversity that is known in the world and has a system of protected areas that covers about 26% of its land area and 3% of its marine-coastal jurisdiction (SINAC, 2014)" (Salido 2015:85, transl. W.G.).

<sup>18</sup>FAO (2013:12).

<sup>19</sup>[web.archive.org/web/20071017041848/http://www.planpuebla-panama.org/proyectos\\_resumen.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20071017041848/http://www.planpuebla-panama.org/proyectos_resumen.htm) [retrieved 24 /11/2015]; Zunino (2010a).

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Zunino (2010b:2-3).

After massive civil society resistance to several projects, the PPP was replaced by the Mesoamerican Project (Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project, MIDP) in 2008 now including Colombia (since 2007). The Dominican Republic joined in 2009. While not all of the original projects were continued and others were executed but not included in the Mesoamerican Project, such as several dam projects, the basic orientation remains. The massive construction of roads and highways that in part cut through important areas of tropical rain forest (e.g., in the Petén of Guatemala) is causing deforestation. It is estimated that more than 300,000 ha of jungle (selva) may be cut down in the next 30 years if all road-building projects were realized.<sup>21</sup> The project also aims at promoting the production of biofuels in several countries.<sup>22</sup> Plants have been installed which process castor-oil plant, oil palm, purging nut [*Jatropha curcas*] and others species.<sup>23</sup> Experience from other countries, such as Colombia, shows that the introduction of oleiferous plants such as African palm has often implied the deforestation of vast areas and the displacement of peasant and indigenous communities.<sup>24</sup> In the lowland areas of the Mexican state of Chiapas alone up to 900,000 ha of land may be converted into areas for the cultivation of the raw materials for biofuel production.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of a Central American Electrical Interconnection System (SIEPAC) establishes interconnections between the different countries from Mexico south to Columbia and creates a regional electricity market,<sup>26</sup> to "guarantee energy safety of the region ... stimulate productive investment, [and] significantly boost regional economy", as the Project Report puts it.<sup>27</sup>

The Mesoamerican Project implies the restructuring of the member states' energy sector towards privatization. Cheap and secure energy is considered a necessary condition for the mega-projects of roads, ports, mining, tourist centres, and export agriculture as well as for the attraction of private investment into the planned export processing free zones.<sup>28</sup>

Although not all are still officially part of the Mesoamerican Project, a number of hydroelectric power plants and dams have been built or are planned in southern Mexico and

---

<sup>21</sup> Zunino (2010b:5).

<sup>22</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2009:15; 2010:24).

<sup>23</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2010:25); Zunino (2010b:10).

<sup>24</sup> Zunino (2010b:10); Carlsen et al. (2010).

<sup>25</sup> Zunino (2010c:2).

<sup>26</sup> Transmission lines of 1,790 kilometres of 230 kw will be constructed. "Strengthening the Regional Electricity Market is crucial to the success of SIEPAC, which is aimed at making the regional entities and their priority activities sustainable. To this end, in August 2008 the IDB approved a first technical-cooperation operation, in the amount of US\$1.5 million, to establish the electric power exchange structure" (Proyecto Mesoamérica 2009:14). However, the interconnection Panama-Columbia, for example, passes through the Darién in Panama, one of the world's richest regions with respect to its biodiversity, and the department Chocó in Columbia (Zunino 2010b:8).

<sup>27</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2010:21). "As a result of the projects within the context of early completion and entry into the operation of SIEPAC, the interest in making investments on the generation of electricity from renewable resources to feed the regional system has been renovated. Such is the case of the funding granted by the BCIE to the Hydroelectric Commission of the Rio Lempa (CEL) of El Salvador, more than US \$114 million for the expansion to 80 MW at 'November 5' Hydroelectric Plant" (Proyecto Mesoamérica 2010:24).

<sup>28</sup> Zunino (2010b:5).

Central America, allegedly as a source of "green energy".<sup>29</sup> However, most of the dams will be constructed in vulnerable areas rich in biodiversity and, as in the case of the Usamacinta River in Mexico and Guatemala, for example, also in archaeological remains. Major forest areas will be flooded, thousands of people displaced and indigenous territories affected by resettlement, among other things.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the ecological, cultural and human costs it is to be asked who profits from these investments. The electricity produced is not destined to the internal demand but to the regional market and will thus probably not improve the power supply of the local population.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the planning and realization of the dam projects has been characterized by the complete absence of or insufficient consultation of the affected peasant and indigenous communities and the lack of participation.<sup>32</sup> All this in violation of the international conventions signed by the regional governments such as ILO Convention 169 (1989) or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which states in Article 10:

"Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. *No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned* and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return."<sup>33</sup>

The major investments in infrastructure which make up the bulk of the Mesoamerican Project are supplemented by minor programmes in the areas of public health, housing<sup>34</sup> and "environmental sustainability".<sup>35</sup> The little importance attributed to this "social axis" is reflected in the fact that only 4% of the funds were dedicated to this sector from 2008 to 2015.<sup>36</sup>

Although the governments have promised to promote "sustainable and competitive productive systems consistent with the preservation of biodiversity"<sup>37</sup>, there can be little doubt that, their development strategy, in fact, continues to be directed toward quantitative economic growth which implies an increase in the use of resources and energy.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Zunino (2010b:9) mentions plans to build up to 381 hydroelectric dams.

<sup>30</sup> Zunino (2010c:3); Finley-Brooks and Thomas (2010); Social Watch (2011).

<sup>31</sup> Zunino (2010b:9).

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Zunino (2010b:9); Finley-Brooks and Thomas (2010:273-277); Social Watch (2011).

<sup>33</sup> United Nations (2007), emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> Central American Low-income Housing Development Programme.

<sup>35</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2009:14). The PPP already included an *Iniciativa Meso-americana de Desarrollo Sostenible*.

<sup>36</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2015).

<sup>37</sup> Proyecto Mesoamérica (2009:21).

<sup>38</sup> A declaration of two ministers of public works and transport, for example, reads as follows: "It is of vital importance to promote commercial facilitation and easy transit of goods between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, to generate new sources of economic growth that generate more jobs for the benefit of the Mesoamerican population" (Ministros de Obras Publicas y Transporte de Guatemala y El Salvador, agosto de 2007 cited in Zunino (2010b:4), transl. W.G.).

Forest areas, indigenous territories and resource management systems are not only threatened by mega-projects such as the Mesoamerican Project or the recent revival of plans to construct an interoceanic canal in Nicaragua, but also by the effects of extreme inequalities in land distribution in other parts of the countries. In Guatemala, for example, less than 2% of the farms control almost 52% of the agricultural land.<sup>39</sup> Since decades, the lack of land for cultivation has driven poor mestizo peasants to advance the so-called agricultural frontier by colonizing indigenous territories in the lowlands, much of it in the Atlantic coast regions of Middle America. They cleared the woods and produced subsistence and cash crops on the relatively poor soils until these became too depleted to continue after a few years. This paved the way for the expansion of cattle-growing by large-scale farmers who occupied the new grasslands. These processes have led to a massive loss of tropical forests. The Central American countries have lost about 1.4% of their forests annually between 1990 and 2010 alone.<sup>40</sup>

### **3 Indigenous groups and sustainable development – examples from the Atlantic Coast regions of Nicaragua and Panama**

As already mentioned in the introduction, indigenous groups are considered by many as "natural" conservationists particularly prone to practice sustainable resource management systems. This is often attributed to their specific culture, world view, and identity.

Anthropological research has indeed brought to light numerous examples for the sustainable use of their environment by indigenous hunting and gathering as well as horticulturalist societies. These practices are based on world views that consider human beings as part of and not as the owners of their environment and see animals, plants and inanimate objects, such as mountains, as animated, possessing a "soul" or spiritual essence as much as humans do. Resource use is often regulated by so-called traditional means such as food taboos on specific species or the establishment of prohibited areas, such as sacred woods, which may serve as recreation areas where animal populations can recover.<sup>41</sup>

However, sustainable economic strategies and world views are not genetically inscribed in indigenous people nor are their world views necessarily stable. They rather reflect the basic orientation of the economic system which in the cases mentioned is oriented to satisfy the limited needs of the population and not, as in capitalist economies, geared to the realization of profit-making by commodity producers.

---

<sup>39</sup> Barry (2012:1).

<sup>40</sup> Own calculation after FAO (2013:8 table 3).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Sandner Le Gall (2007:61-74); for the Miskitu see Nietschmann (1973:111).

I will sketch the complexities of the problem using the examples of the about 121,000 Miskitu (also Miskito) and the 80,000 Kuna Indians, the largest indigenous population groups in the Atlantic coast regions of Nicaragua and Panama.<sup>42</sup>

For much of their known history, the Miskitu and Kuna subsistence depended on the combination of slash-and-burn agriculture (cassava, coconuts, plantains and bananas, among others), fishing and hunting.<sup>43</sup> Hunting and fishing for subsistence alone, was "geared to high dependable returns without causing massive ecological disruption ... To some extent food preferences may be thought of as adaptive mechanisms for maintaining acceptable levels of exploitation."<sup>44</sup> The forest-fallow system of shifting cultivation used for subsistence agriculture was "a complex and ecologically conservative system which closely simulates in morphology and function the tropical forest which it replaces."<sup>45</sup>

Miskitu and Kuna subsistence economies were characterized by the use of simple technology, a high variability of exploited species with respect to space and season, and the combination of a wide range of subsistence activities (multi-tasking or livelihood diversification).<sup>46</sup> The subsistence economy was integrated into an extended system of generalized reciprocity which levelled somewhat differences in the access to foodstuffs and confirmed the social relations in the villages.<sup>47</sup> This also discouraged surplus production and, in addition to food taboos and spiritually or mythologically founded prohibitions to sell food stuffs in the villages, restricted resource use.<sup>48</sup>

However, both groups maintained commercial and temporary labour relations with European settlers and their descendants since centuries selling non-food species or crops such as hawksbill turtle (sought-after for tortoiseshell) and coconuts or working for limited periods for foreign companies engaged in mining, lumbering or banana plantations.<sup>49</sup> More recently, the stress on the indigenous livelihood systems increased markedly as a result of the encroachment of mestizo peasants and farmers into indigenous territory, environmental destruction, population growth, the loss of opportunities for wage labour, and the depletion of animal species used for hunting. Production of cash crops and fishing for sale were heavily intensified in the second half of the 20th century. Production for exchange gained in importance, new species were hunted and fished, such as white-tailed deer, tapir, manatee or shrimp<sup>50</sup>, subsistence crops or species began to be sold even within the villages and relations of reciprocity became more and more restricted to the immedi-

---

<sup>42</sup>See INEC (2006:41), Davis (2015:cuadro V.3) and Sandner Le Gall (2007:101-106, 230) for population statistics.

Kuna is the historical spelling for an indigenous group also known as Cuna or Guna.

<sup>43</sup>See, e.g., Sandner Le Gall (2007:111-116); Kindblad (2010).

<sup>44</sup>Nietschmann (1973:111); for the Kuna see Sandner Le Gall (2007:115, 121-122, 149, 327-332).

<sup>45</sup>Nietschmann (1973:130); see also Castillo (2001); Sandner Le Gall (2007:113, 184).

<sup>46</sup>Sandner Le Gall (2007:327-328).

<sup>47</sup>See, e.g., Helms (1971:105); Nietschmann (1973:183-187); Dennis (2004:111, 126); Sandner Le Gall (2007:123); Kindblad (2010:344-345).

<sup>48</sup>Sandner Le Gall (2007:121-123, 328-331).

<sup>49</sup>Gabbert (1985:83-98); Sandner Le Gall (2007:95, 111-112, 114, 162-163).

<sup>50</sup>See, e.g., Nietschmann (1973:112).

ate family and neighbours.<sup>51</sup> Consequently the commercial exploitation of species formerly only used for subsistence, such as green turtle, was intensified.<sup>52</sup> This, in addition with the legal as well as the illegal lobster fishing by international commercial fleets since the 1990s has resulted in the depletion of marine species and the resulting scarcity of species formerly used for subsistence.<sup>53</sup>

The example of the Miskitu and Kuna hints to several issues closely related to the debate on sustainability:

1. Indigenous systems of resource use that may have been sustainable in the past can lose this characteristic when confronted with population growth, a shrinking resource base, the monetarization of economic and social relations and the commodification of resources, goods and services.

2. The so-called "traditional" resource management systems depend on particular social and political structures, norms and world views. Compliance to certain norms and prohibitions, such as to food taboos, for example, is in many cases only enforced by the threat of supernatural sanctions, the risk to lose social status in the community and the authority of indigenous leaders, headmen or elders. These bases are threatened by cultural change and tendencies towards individualization triggered by the monetarization and commodification, resulting in processes of social differentiation and in the expansion of needs. The spread of the values of the capitalist consumer society and secularization are also important, especially among the younger generations.<sup>54</sup>

3. As a precondition to reach a sustainable situation, access to the local resources and species has to be restricted. First steps in this direction have been already made by the creation of autonomous territories for the Kuna (in 1938) and Miskitu (in 1987) communities. However, while the Kuna have indeed achieved a considerable degree of effective control over their territory, such has not yet been the case with the Miskitu in Nicaragua. Here the national institutions still decide about resource exploitation frequently in open violation of indigenous rights. There is a lack of political will to effectively control resource exploitation and the Atlantic coast region is still mainly considered as a source of natural riches that have to be exploited to contribute to the national economy.<sup>55</sup> In both regions there are still serious problems with the encroachment of mestizo colonists or gold seekers into indigenous territories, and the granting of mining and lumbering concessions to foreign companies by the national governments.<sup>56</sup> But due to their stronger or-

---

<sup>51</sup> See Helms (1971:106, 156); Nietschmann (1973:112, 161, 177, 183, 192, 196); Dennis (2004:146); Sandner Le Gall (2007:126, 129, 328, 333-336).

<sup>52</sup> Nietschmann (1973:149).

<sup>53</sup> Dennis (2004:163-164); Sandner Le Gall (2007:158, 327, 331, 338); Cupples (2012:17-18).

<sup>54</sup> Already in the early 1970s, some younger Miskitu did not believe in the existence of the spirits that guarded species from overexploitation any more (Nietschmann 1973:112-113).

<sup>55</sup> Sandner Le Gall (2007:318-326, 342f); Finley-Brook (2012:401-402, 405-406).

<sup>56</sup> Sandner Le Gall (2007:139-140, 142); McLean (2012:476-477); Galanova (2017).

ganization, the Kuna are in a better condition to defend their territory and communal resources.

4. The Miskitu and Kuna examples also hint to the importance of social cohesion and the strength of indigenous social and political institutions as a major precondition to maintain and develop resource management systems that can lead to a sustainable use of the environment.<sup>57</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

Since the 1980s, we can discern at least three important tendencies in the government policies and discourse related to development:

1. Neoliberal thought has penetrated politics and society on all levels implying, among other things, the downsizing of the public sector, privatization policies, the confidence that deregulation and free trade will be working in the benefit of all, rich and poor, industrialized countries as well as Third World societies.

2. The spread of an ecological discourse among leading politicians and international organizations that has resulted in the generalization of the idea of "sustainable development" as a goal to reach.

3. The extension of autonomy rights to indigenous people in international and national legislation. First steps in this direction have been already made by the creation of autonomous territories for the Kuna (in 1938) and Miskitu (in 1987) communities, in both cases as a result of the attempts to end armed conflicts with the respective national government.

However, as has been shown, existing laws and international conventions are often side-stepped or ignored by governments and there remain important gaps between discourse and concrete policies which still focus on large-scale infra-structure projects and export processing free zones. A narrow concept of sustainability that considers biological resources primarily as usable goods to be deployed to their maximum underlies most of the current international and national development policies as exemplified here with the Mesoamerican Project. Even the UN Resolution on the Agenda for Sustainable Development remains trapped in the logic of growth which is measured, quite conventionally, in terms of increases in the gross domestic product (GDP). Among other things, the industry's share of the GDP should be "significantly raised".<sup>58</sup> International trade is considered "an

---

<sup>57</sup> MacFarland (1985); Sandner Le Gall (2007:338-343).

<sup>58</sup> United Nations (2015:19, 20, 29).

engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, [which] contributes to the promotion of sustainable development".<sup>59</sup> This is wishful thinking, at best.

The Sustainable Development Goals suggest that all participants, such as governments, entrepreneurs, urban and rural populations, share the same interests. In fact, however, there are always conflicts of interest since the costs and benefits of specific decisions are often very unevenly distributed. It is therefore essential to investigate the possibilities for participation in political and development issues of the parties involved as well as methods to handle the resulting conflicts. In addition, strategies to meet different sustainable development goals may contradict one another. While energy production by hydroelectric power plants may be desirable to reduce carbon dioxide emission thus combating climate change, it can affect land rights of indigenous or non-indigenous peasants or hunter-gatherers leading to their impoverishment, for example.

A major problem of large-scale development projects, such as the Mesoamerican Project, is that local populations do often not profit from the mega-projects realized (e.g., the integrated power network). In addition, they foster tendencies towards the centralization of production which implies, among other things, an increase in transport and thus also in resource and energy consumption.

The present economic system cannot be sustainable since it is based on the creation of unlimited needs, which are satisfied only insofar as they correspond to a fully solvent demand, and on the increase in externalities imposed on the societies by the powerful actors in economy and politics. To foster biofuel production in third world countries only to perpetuate individual motor car traffic in Europe is certainly not the solution but part of the problem.

A move towards a sustainable mode of production and consumption will only be possible if we come to a redefinition of the goals of development, work towards a decentralization and localization of the economy, as far as possible, and advance in the direction of a profound democratization of world society in both the political and economic realms. No simple solutions are at sight. However, a reduction of resource and energy use particularly in the so-called developed countries is necessary. Development has to be disconnected from an increase in the consumption of more and more goods and linked to other goals such as the enhancement of happiness. Results of happiness studies are encouraging as they suggest that happiness is positively correlated with equality and will not increase with material wealth once basic needs are fulfilled.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> United Nations (2015:29).

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett (2010); Easterlin et al. (2010); United Nations (2016).

## 5 Further research

The investigation of sustainable resource management is not just a technical or institutional issue since ecological, social, political and cultural factors play a key role.<sup>61</sup> We need more investigation on the empirical local ecological knowledge, which is "holistic, intuitive and qualitative".<sup>62</sup>

Discussions of sustainability do often pay insufficient attention to social structure and power relations. However, sustainability is not just an issue of more or less adequate and efficient policies but is frequently related to the different and often conflicting interests of actors involved.

While "indigenous" or "traditional" resource management systems (such as communal land holding) are frequently considered particularly sustainable, this is not necessarily the case. The latter quality is not due to some essence or world view indissolubly linked to a certain kind of people but to being "non-capitalist", aiming at satisfying subsistence needs and not accumulation. Therefore, ethnographic research is needed of the conditions that lead to the establishment and maintenance of sustainable practices of land and resource use. This includes not only world views and customary legal systems but also their interrelation with other factors such as population density. The internal organization of communities ("good governance in the tenure of resources") has been stressed as an important factor in securing sustainable development.<sup>63</sup> However, empirical examples vary widely and we need more research on the conditions that make a certain type of governance work in one situation but not in another.

Middle America is a region with a pronounced ecological, political and social heterogeneity. Therefore, differentiated studies of the potentials, risks and obstacles to move into the direction of sustainable development are necessary. Beyond the general economic and political conditions and demographic factors, the design of autonomy laws as well as local norms and institutions regulating the use of private and common property will be of key importance in the case of the indigenous populations.

---

<sup>61</sup> Sandner Le Gall (2007:40-42).

<sup>62</sup> Sandner Le Gall (2007:63).

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., FAO (2013:34-36).

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Eric R., Emil A. Cherrington, Laura Tremblay-Boyer, Africa I. Flores, and Emilio Sempris. 2008. Identifying Critical Areas for Conservation: Biodiversity and Climate Change in Central America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. *Biodiversity* 9 (3-4):89-99.
- Assies, Willem. 1999. Pueblos indígenas y reforma del Estado en América Latina. In *El reto de la diversidad. Pueblos indígenas y reforma del Estado en América Latina*, edited by Willem Assies, Gemma van der Haar and André Hoekema. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, pp. 21-55.
- Barry, Bridget. 2012. Guatemala and Integrated Rural Development: Towards Inclusive Growth in the Rural Sector. *Policy International Research Brief* (37):1-6.
- Cabedo Mallol, Vicente. 2004. *Constitucionalismo y derecho indígena en América Latina*. Valencia: Editorial de la UPV.
- Carlsen, Laura, Michael Collins, Oscar Chacón, Paula Álvarez, Ricardo Verdum, and Christopher Loperena. 2010. *Inter-American Development Bank Megaprojects: Displacement and Forced Migration*.  
<https://www.ciponline.org/research/entry/inter-american-development-bank-megaprojects-displacement-and-forced-migrat> [retrieved 2/7/2018].
- Castillo, Arcadio, and H. A. Lessios. 2001. Lobster Fishery by the Kuna Indians in the San Blas Region of Panama (Kuna Yala). *Crustaceana* 74 (5):459-475.
- Cupples, Julie. 2012. Wild Globalization: The Biopolitics of Climate Change and Global Capitalism on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast. *Antipode* 44 (1):10-30.
- Davis, Enriqueta. 2015. *Diagnóstico de la Población Indígena de Panamá con base en los Censos de Población y Vivienda de 2010: INEC (Panama)*.  
[http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/INEC/archivos/P6571INDIGENA\\_FINAL\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/INEC/archivos/P6571INDIGENA_FINAL_FINAL.pdf) [retrieved 23/6/2018].
- Dennis, Philip A. 2004. *The Miskitu People of Awastara*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Easterlin, Richard A., Laura Angelescu McVey, Malgorzata Switek, Onnicha Sawangfa, and Jacqueline Smith Zweig. 2010. The happiness-income paradox revisited. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107 (52):22463-22468.
- FAO. 2013. *Tenure of indigenous peoples territories and REDD+ as a forestry management incentive: the case of Mesoamerican countries*: FAO.
- Finley-Brook, Mary. 2012a. Market Citizenship in Eastern Nicaraguan Indigenous Territories. *Alternative* 8 (4):393-408.
- Finley-Brook, Mary. 2012b. El Tratado de Libre Comercio entre Centroamérica, República Dominicana y Estados Unidos (CAFTA-DR) y el desarrollo desigual. *Mesoamérica* 54:54-93.

- Finley-Brook, Mary, and Curtis Thomas. 2010. From malignant neglect to extreme intervention: Treatment of displaced indigenous populations in two large hydro projects in Panama. *Water Alternatives* 3 (2):269-290.
- Gabbert, Wolfgang. 1985. *Die Atlantikküste Nicaraguas - fehlende nationalstaatliche Integration, Erbe von Kolonialismus und Bereicherungsdiktatur (Entwicklungsperspektiven No. 15/16)*. Kassel.
- Galanova, Mira. 2017. Lush heartlands of Nicaragua's Miskito people spark deadly land disputes, *The Guardian*, March 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/01/lush-heartlands-of-nicaragua-miskito-people-spark-deadly-land-disputes> [retrieved 27/6/2018].
- González, Miguel. 2012. Securing Rights in Tropical Lowlands. Community Land Property Ownership in the Nicaraguan Autonomous Regime. *Alternative* 8 (4):426-446.
- Helms, Mary W. 1971. *Asang - Adaptations to Culture Contact in a Miskito Community*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.
- Herlihy, Laura Hobson. 2016. The New Colonization of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast. *Nacla*, September 6, 2016. <https://nacla.org/print/11190> [retrieved 27/6/2018].
- Houseal, Brian, Craig MacFarland, Guillermo Archibold, and Aurelio Chiari. 1985. Indigenous Cultures and Protected Areas in Central America. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 9-1. <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csqa/article/indigenous-cultures-and-protected-areas-central-america> [retrieved 26/6/2018].
- INEC. 2006. *VIII Censo de Población y IV de Vivienda, 2005. Resumen Censal*. Managua: INEC.
- Kindblad, Christopher. 2010. *Gift and Exchange among the Miskitu on the Atlantic Coast, Nicaragua. A Historical-Comparative Study of Cultural Change, 20th Century*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishers.
- McLean Cornelio, Esther Melba. 2012. Report on the advances in territorial property rights of the Sumu-Mayangna community of Awas Tingni, Nicaragua. *Alternative* 8 (4):466-478.
- Nietschmann, Bernard. 1973. *Between Land and Water: The Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua*. New York: Seminar Press.
- 2018]
- Proyecto Mesoamérica. 2015. *Presentación General del Proyecto Mesoamérica, Agosto de 2015*. [http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org:8082/joomla/images/Documentos/ppt%20general%20PM%20con%20cifras%20\\$%2013%20agosto%2015%20VF.pdf](http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org:8082/joomla/images/Documentos/ppt%20general%20PM%20con%20cifras%20$%2013%20agosto%2015%20VF.pdf) [retrieved 22/6/2018].
- Proyecto Mesoamérica. 2010. *2009-2010 Executive Report on the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project*.

- [http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org:8082/joomla/images/XII\\_Cumbre\\_Tuxtla/libro2009\\_2010\\_ingles%20LR.pdf](http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org:8082/joomla/images/XII_Cumbre_Tuxtla/libro2009_2010_ingles%20LR.pdf). [retrieved 22/6/2018].
- Proyecto Mesoamérica. 2009. *2008-2009 Executive Report on the Mesoamerica Project*. <http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org:8082/joomla/images/Documentos/Mesoamerica%20Project%20Progress%20Report%202008-2009.pdf> [retrieved 22/6/2018].
- Ross, Anne, and Kathleen Pickering. 2002. The Politics of Reintegrating Australian Aboriginal and American Indian Indigenous Knowledge into Resource Management: The Dynamics of Resource Appropriation and Cultural Revival. *Human Ecology* 30 (2):187-214.
- Ruddle, Kenneth. 1994. Local Knowledge in the Folk Management of Fisheries and Coastal Marine Environments. In *Folk Management in the World's Fisheries: Lessons for Modern Fisheries Management*, edited by C.L. Dyer and J.R. McGoodwin. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, pp. 161-206.
- Salido, Joaquín. 2015. *Una Mirada a los países del Proyecto Mesoamérica*. México, D.F.: Naciones Unidas.
- Sandner Le Gall, Verena. 2007. *Indigenes Management mariner Ressourcen in Zentralamerika*. Kiel: Geographisches Institut der Universität Kiel.
- Sequeira Rankin, Francisco, Dolores Figueroa, Miguel González, and Arelly Barbeyto. 2017. A 30 años del estatuto de autonomía del caribe. Otra autonomía es posible. *Revista envío* 429:1-10. <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5420> [retrieved 20/7/2018].
- Sinnott, Emily, John Nash, and Augusto de la Torre. 2010. *Natural Resources in Latin America and the Caribbean. Beyond Booms and Busts?* Washington D.C.: The World Bank.
- Social Watch. 2011. *Proyecto mesoamérica: cambio de nombre, no de empresa*. [www.socialwatch.org/sites/default/files/CO7\\_ProyectoMesoamerica\\_2011.pdf](http://www.socialwatch.org/sites/default/files/CO7_ProyectoMesoamerica_2011.pdf) [retrieved 22 /6/2018].
- United, Nations 2016. *World Happiness Report 2016*. United Nations publications. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2016/HR-V1\\_web.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2016/HR-V1_web.pdf) [retrieved 20/7/2018].
- United, Nations 2015. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 21 October 2015*. Seventieth session, Agenda items 15 and 116, General Assembly, A/RES/70/1.
- United, Nations. 2007. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Sixty-first session, Agenda item 68, Report of the Human Rights Council, A/61/L.67.
- van Cott, Donna Lee. 2000. A Political Analysis of Legal Pluralism in Bolivia and Colombia. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32 (1):207-234.
- Varese, Stefano. 1996. The New Environmentalist Movement of Latin American Indigenous People. In *Valuing Local Knowledge: Indigenous People and Intellectual Property*

*Rights*, edited by Stephen D. Brush and Doreen Stabinsky. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, pp. 102-142.

Wilkinson, Richard, and Kate Pickett. 2010. *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* [revised edition]. London: Penguin.