

The Power of Presence

Reflections from more than 20 years providing international accompaniment to threatened human rights defenders in Guatemala



Former de facto president Efraín Ríos Montt takes the stand during the trial for genocide. Photo credit: NISGUA

La vida es lucha, Life is struggle. For many Guatemalan human rights defenders, activists, and community leaders, struggling to defend their rights is a fact of life. Those who bravely stand up against war, political violence, inequality and elite economic interests are regularly attacked, and the impacts reverberate across communities, generations and movements. Since 1981, members of the NISGUA network have stood alongside many of these human rights defenders, amplifying their voices and showing cross-border solidarity in the struggle for social and global transformation. In recent decades, **a physical presence through international accompaniment has been used as a tool to dissuade the threats against human rights defenders and open up political space for them to continue their work.**

Flexibility and agility have allowed for accompaniment to evolve in a post-war climate where human rights defenders continue to be attacked. What began with accompaniment of the return of Guatemalan refugees who fled to Mexico during the internal armed conflict has now expanded to include work with community leaders receiving threats for

defending their lands against transnational corporate interests.

In part, **our accompaniment work is our recognition of the interconnected nature of global oppression**; as people living in the global north, we have a responsibility to prioritize and amplify the voices of those most impacted by injustice. As such, the advocacy work of our network is deeply informed by relationships built on longevity and trust with the human rights defenders we accompany - in some cases that longevity spans several decades. We rely on these voices to share information about the current human rights situation in Guatemala and the harmful impacts of U.S. foreign policy with grassroots communities in the U.S. who are organized to take action.

As we celebrate 15 years as part of the international accompaniment coalition ACOGUATE, we invite you to reflect with us on both the foundations of accompaniment and the ways it has changed over the years. It has been quite a journey, and we hope you will continue to be part of the NISGUA network as our solidarity work evolves in the years to come.



Accompaniers walk between communities in Rabinal. Photo credit: Kevin Hayes

“An international presence could provide visibility, outside eyes and access to information.”

Paula Worby, Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR

The Origins of Accompaniment

Guatemalan refugees return home

In the early 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans fled to Mexico to escape the scorched earth policies enacted by military dictatorships trained in counterinsurgency tactics by the U.S. government. Many carried with them vivid and recent memories of unfathomable massacres in their communities. Some fled with their families, others alone, having left the remains of loved ones killed in Guatemala.

At the time, NISGUA was deeply engaged in communications work to get the real story of what was happening out of Guatemala and into the international consciousness. By the early 1990s, members of the international community were strategically located in the refugee camps, taking cues from the highly organized Permanent Commissions (known as CCPPs) formed by Guatemalan refugees in Mexico.

The questions that faced the CCPPs were many: How would refugees recuperate the ancestral lands taken from them during the conflict? How would they organize the elaborate logistics of the return given the changes in cultural make-up of communities and the accumulation of livestock and other resources while in Mexico? How could they guarantee the safety of their families upon return? Would they be forced into civil defense patrols?

International accompaniment was neither meant to nor capable of addressing these complexities. It could, however, shine an international spotlight on the return in the hopes of dissuading further violence from the Guatemalan military as communities returned into militarized areas. The 1992 Agreement signed between the CCPPs and the Guatemalan government outlined how the return would take place. Among many other stipulations, the CCPPs negotiated the right to have international presence during their return and called on international organizations, churches, the UNHCR, and others to accompany returning communities as they crossed the border.

“When outside the country, you have all the geopolitical leverage with the government. Once you’re inside, all that leverage goes away... The sophistication of refugee organizing was knowing that international presence was their leverage once inside the country and wanting to capitalize on the power of an international complaint. Accompaniment was part of an effort not to lose that leverage, while creating strategic alliances.” *Paula Worby, Former UNHCR*

Through the Guatemala Accompaniment Project (G.A.P.) of the National Coordinating Office on the Refugees and Displaced of Guatemala (NCOORD), members of the NISGUA network accompanied the return of communities throughout the 1990s. While the return itself had significant international presence, the returned communities continued to face major risks after the international spotlight had faded. The massacre that took place in 1995 when the military opened fire on the returned community of Aurora 8 de Octubre (Finca Xamán) highlighted the need for ongoing accompaniment.

After the return and signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, some international organizations left the country believing that the violence was over and the risk Guatemalans faced from the state significantly reduced. However, based on the ongoing calls from return refugee communities, G.A.P. maintained a fairly constant presence until a new request emerged in the 2000s.

Justice for Crimes of the Past

A request for continued accompaniment

After a phase of quiet organizing amongst survivors in five departments, the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR) filed charges of genocide and crimes against humanity against former dictators Romeo Lucas García in 2000 and Efraín Ríos Montt in 2001 and their respective military high commands. Recognizing the vulnerability for witnesses living in remote areas, the AJR and their lawyers at the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) requested formal international accompaniment to act as a dissuasive presence for possible attacks against them.

A consultation process with other return communities ensued, and it was agreed that G.A.P. would join NISGUA in accompanying witnesses under the newly formed international coalition, ACOGUATE. As such, our long-term commitment to the AJR and the genocide cases began.

As efforts towards justice and accountability moved forward, attacks against human rights defenders continued. Our work expanded to include accompaniment for witnesses in other cases of massacres, forced disappearances and sexual slavery. Requests for accompaniment from union leaders and campesino organizations began, and by 2005, accompaniment work had expanded to include more than 20 different cases and organizations.



Forensic anthropologists analyze the remains of people exhumed in Las Cruces, Petén in 2010. Photo Credit: ACOGUATE



An accompanier observes a community consultation.
Photo credit: Kevin Hayes

1992 Agreement between Permanent Commissions (CCPPs) & Guatemalan Government: Part 3, Section A

"Accompaniment of the return is understood to be a physical presence provided by...national and international organizations, to accompany during the transportation, relocation and reintegration stages of the return."

Economic Policies Developed During the Armed Conflict Come to Fruition

Communities experience ongoing oppression as they defend their lands against mining



Thousands of people gather at the sacred temples of Zaculeu in Huehuetenango for the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Photo credit: NISGUA

Many of the organizations we began to accompany were feeling the effects of economic policies that were implemented during the armed conflict. People who had fled the violence returned to their homes only to find they no longer held the titles to the land. The forced displacement of over one million people led to a re-ordering of territory and land to the benefit of Guatemalan elites. In fact, many Guatemalan organizations point out that one of the primary goals of the genocide was to consolidate a neoliberal economic agenda based on a resource extraction model—one that depended on massive forced displacement and destruction of the social and cultural fabric of communities.

Building on the stage that had been set during the armed conflict, laws were put in place in the immediate post-conflict period that dramatically favored transnational resource extraction activities. The quick passing of the 1997 Mining Law after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 allowed for a flood of direct foreign investment into the country. The signing of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005 swung that door wide open.

U.S. and Canadian mining companies took full advantage of this new environment, gaining access to exploration and extraction licenses granted by the government without the free, prior and informed consent of impacted communities, many of whom were also impacted by the massacres perpetrated by the Guatemalan military.

“Each community consultation the Departmental Assembly of Huehuetenango (ADH) has carried out has counted on an international presence. But accompaniment is also important after the consultations when the State and the companies attempt to criminalize us in order to weaken our organizing capacity. Over the years, accompaniment from NISGUA strengthens us as we organize in defense of our rights.

Rubén Herrera, Departmental Assembly of Huehuetenango (ADH)



Women in Cunen participate in a community consultation, where they vote against the presence of transnational extraction activities. Photo credit: ACOGUATE



The community of San Pedro Necta demands the release of Rubén Herrera, criminalized for defending water, land and the right to free, prior and informed consent. Photo credit: NISGUA

While continuing the process of healing and seeking justice for the deep wounds of the armed conflict, many of the same communities impacted by genocide began to stand up in defense of their lands. Transnational resource extraction companies increasingly joined with traditional actors, such as state and clandestine security and intelligence forces, in committing human rights violations in order to quell this local opposition. Communities who already had experience with international accompaniment through our long-term presence with the AJR began to contact ACOGUATE with requests for support. As a result, we expanded our focus to include accompaniment of people working in defense of life and territory. We started to accompany community consultations, legal cases where community leaders have been criminalized, as well as leaders and organizations that have received threats and intimidation because they speak out against these projects.

Looking to the Future

The evolution of accompaniment and solidarity work

There has been an ebb and flow to the number of organizations and individuals we have accompanied over the past 15 years. In some cases, we have provided a timely presence, during a march or community consultation. In other instances, as is the case with the AJR, we have provided a constant international presence for the past 15 years. Currently, ACOGUATE accompanies more than 30 organizations that are defending the right to consultation and self-determination, justice and dignity.



Banner created by survivors showing their lives and struggles for justice. Photo Credit: NISGUA

As an organization that values relationships and long-term commitment, it has been and continues to be an honor for NISGUA to have accompanied these struggles for so many years. Being present alongside those who bear the brunt of U.S. economic and foreign policy, we have witnessed the importance of U.S. cultural and political transformation in the reduction of human rights violations in Guatemala. We are grateful to be part of a grassroots network that has been willing and able to adapt to the evolving circumstances, while striving towards mutuality and collective liberation in our solidarity work.

As we look to the future, we know that international accompaniment continues to be one of many vital tools that human rights defenders, organizations and communities use to carry out their work for justice. We invite you to continue to stand with them as they work towards the peace that was imagined when refugee communities first returned to Guatemala.



Overlooking Guadalupe, Santa Rosa, where communities are resisting mining exploration and exploitation licenses. Photo credit: NISGUA

"In 2014, more attacks were registered against human rights defenders than in any year prior. In the upcoming election year, a dissuasive presence will be all the more necessary - one that is based on long-term relationships built on trust."

Phil Neff, former NISGUA staff and companioner

Become an Accompanier with G.A.P.

Learn the power of presence in the global movement for justice and self-determination

The Guatemalan Accompaniment Project (G.A.P.) of the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) trains and places qualified volunteers as human rights accompaniers. Accompaniers work as human rights observers, providing an international presence alongside Guatemalans organizing in defense of their rights, including precedent-setting genocide trials and local opposition to mega-projects. Accompaniment is one tool used in response to threats, harassment and violence faced by survivors of Guatemala's 36-year-long civil war, as well as grassroots organizations working for justice and indigenous communities defending their right to life and territory.

Accompaniers work in pairs, travel between the capital and rural regions, connect with a diversity of organizations, observe and report on conditions, monitor the human rights situation, and provide a crucial link to the international community. NISGUA trains volunteers and matches them with groups in the U.S. that support the accompanier's stay, both financially and personally.

For more information, please visit: nisgua.org/get_involved/join_GAP

We're now recruiting for a
January 2016 training,
in the Bay Area, CA.

**Application deadline:
October 15, 2015**

Placements available
throughout 2016.



Former accompaniers show solidarity with the AJR at the 2012 G.A.P. gathering. Photo credit: NISGUA

About NISGUA

The US-based Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) employs strategic, creative and coordinated grassroots activism and advocacy to pursue justice for war crimes, to change harmful US policies and to promote sustainable communities in Guatemala. NISGUA provides human rights accompaniment to Guatemalans whose work puts them at risk of threats and attacks.

NETWORK IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLE OF GUATEMALA / NISGUA

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