Violence and visibility in oil palm and sugarcane conflicts: the case of Polochic Valley, Guatemala

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Abstract:

Over the last two decades, the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane plantations in the Polochic Valley (Guatemala) has exacerbated the historical struggle of Maya-Q’eqchi’ peoples for land rights. Based on a mixed methods approach, I examine the dynamics of the conflict between 1998 and 2014, focusing on the visibility, manifestation and intensity of violence and the role of NGOs and peasant organizations in opposition to oil palm and sugarcane plantations. I show that the evolution of the conflict can be explained by changes in the strength of organizations alliances due to tensions, lack of coordination, as well as the fear of state repression and the funding context of these organizations. These results allow me to discuss how violence, the role of these organizations and the dynamics of related events have influenced the visibility of the conflict associated with the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane plantations in the Polochic.

Keywords: agrarian and environmental conflicts, flex-crops; human rights, NGOs, peasant organizations
Introduction

In recent decades, the expansion of large areas of so-called flex-crops\(^1\), such as oil palm \((Elaeis\ guineensis)\) and sugarcane \((Saccharum\ officinarum)\), has led to major social and environmental change in Southeast Asia and Latin America (Borras et al 2011; FAO 2014). This expansion started in 1990 (Asia) and 2000 (Latin America) due to the intensifying demand in the Northern Hemisphere for agrofuels\(^2\), edible oils, industrial lubricants and cosmetics in the case of oil palm. Sugarcane was similarly sought after in order to produce agrofuels, animal feed or fertilizers. Demand for both flex-crops has also been driven from emerging centers of international capital in the Southern Hemisphere, the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and some middle-income countries (MICs) (Borras et al 2015). Forecasts suggest that by 2020 the variety and quantity of products fabricated from both crops will only continue to increase (Alonso-Fradejas et al 2016; MacKay et al 2015). Producer countries are thus facilitating the identification, quantification and provision of ‘suitable’ land for such crops (Borras et al 2013), under the assumption that there are marginal (unpopulated) lands which are apt for cultivation and that these flex-crops can solve manifold energy, climate, economic and financial crises (World Bank 2010).

The expansion of these two crops alone has already led to widespread and major social and environmental changes. In Latin America, they have often prevented local communities from accessing their main livelihoods, as oil palm has been grown on land that communities could use to sow staple crops and native forests, which constitute their principle sources of food, water and building materials (Cardenas 2012; Alonso-Fradejas 2012). Likewise, both sugarcane and oil palm plantations have reduced soil

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\(^1\) Flex-crops are commodities that have multiple and interchangeable commercial destinations. For example, palm oil can be sold as food, agrofuel or as an industrial product, while sugarcane can be an agrofuel or food (see Borras et al 2014).

\(^2\) The term ‘agrofuel’ was coined by the international Via Campesina movement to avoid the use of the prefix ‘bio’ that refers to life and to stress that the prime materials used for fuels come from agrarian (‘agro’) sources (Joao Pedro Stedile, MST-La Via Campesina 6/06/07). In this article, I use agrofuel as a synonym for biofuel.
fertility and increased water and air pollution (Goldemberg et al 2008; Martinelli and Filoso 2008). Moreover, social differentiation characterizes oil palm plantations, where the poorest smallholders, the landless and women – often overlapping categories – are oftentimes unable to reap the benefits from cultivation or employment (Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Cardenas 2012; Mingorría et al 2014).

Many of these negative impacts could be expressed as environmental and/or agrarian conflicts (Dietz et al 2014; Alonso-Fradejas 2015; Gerber 2011), which may sometimes be made visible by environmental, climatic or agrarian justice movements in transnational campaigns against agrofuels, deforestation or land grabbing (Pye 2010; Brad 2015; Borras et al 2013). However, such impacts may not become visible at a national or international scale, but only at a local scale in certain phases of the conflict (Marin-Burgos 2014). With visibility I refer to conflicts that appear in national and international newspapers and are the object of public demonstrations. In this essay I assess visibility by considering any reference to the conflict in national and international media sources, specifically the printed press. In other cases in Latin America such visibility has conditioned the “success” of struggles against oil palm plantations and the decisions to change strategies of resistance (Marin-Burgos 2014).

Recent studies have shown how the visibility of flex-crop conflicts might be influenced by (1) the local population’s perception of the benefit or harm caused by plantations (Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2015); (2) the roles and alliances between national and international NGOs and peasant organizations (Pye 2010; Brad 2015); (3) the intensity of the violence at local groups in opposition to the expansion of oil palm plantations; and (4) whether the local population has been dispossessed or not from their land (Maher 2015; Edelman and León 2013; Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Grajales 2011). An

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3 This includes conflicts known as ecological, ecological-distributive, socio-environmental or ecological-social and conflicts with environmental content.
example of a conflict that has been visibilized is the accelerated expansion of oil palm in Indonesia, where European and Indonesian environmental and agrarian movements have developed transnational campaigns from shared anti-agrofuel activism. The campaigns highlighted the loss of biodiversity, problems of climate change, dispossession of land and the violation of human rights associated with oil palm plantations (Pye 2010; Grajales 2015; Brad 2015). According to Pye (2010), the anti-agrofuels campaign has been successful in: (1) creating transnational debates regarding the main environmental impacts of oil palm plantations and agrofuel production; (2) forging alliances between Indonesian grassroots movements and transnational movements; (3) linking environmental problems with agrarian and human rights issues; and (4) including sustainability criteria on agrofuel production in the European Renewable Energy Directive (EU 2008, article 17).

Recently, studies of oil palm and sugarcane plantation-related conflicts have focused on understanding the role played by agrarian and environmental NGOs at regional (Wolford 2004), national (Brad 2014), and transnational (Pye 2010) scales; or on exploring the conflict from the perspective of local populations (Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2014; Edelmán and León 2013; Alonso-Fradejas 2015). This article contributes to this body of literature by identifying the factors that have influenced the visibility of conflict generated by flex-crops in the Polochic Valley (hereinafter ‘Polochic’), Guatemala. In this region, three quarters of the fertile land (more than 10,000 hectares) have been occupied by oil palm and sugarcane plantations since 1998 and 2005 respectively (Alonso-Fradejas et al 2012; Mingorria et al 2014), resulting in recurring and state-acknowledged land conflicts (SAA 2014). However, these conflicts only became internationally known in 2011, after NGOs denounced ongoing violations of land and human rights (OACNUDH 2013).
When I talk about conflicts in this article, I refer to disputes and confrontations, visible or invisible, which occur as a result of flex-crops plantations and/or their expansion. Such disputes can be related to their environmental impacts, potentially resulting in changes in land tenure and resource access relations, and over labor rights and working conditions (Borras et al 2010; Marin-Burgos 2014). In the Polochic, oil palm and sugarcane plantation conflict is manifested through Q’eqchi’ groups and a diverse types of social organizations in opposition to the expansion of flex-crops that are controlled by two oligarchic families present in the Polochic. The main arguments in opposition to this expansion are that the growth of flex-crops has generated water pollution, exploitative labor conditions and/or the impossibility of Q’eqchi’ population to access land; as well as direct violence, which is understood by Q’eqchi’ groups, in similar way as that describe by WHO (1996) individual physical and physiological harm or subtle forms of coercion.4

The conflict is analyzed by applying a variety of methods a temporal (1998-2014) and multi-scale (local, national and transnational) perspective. Upon identifying the main phases of the conflict, I examine (1) the visibility/invisibility of the conflict and the interactions among Q’eqchi’ groups that are in opposition to flex-crops, NGOs, peasant organizations, oligarchic families and government institutions; (2) the manifestation and intensity of the directed violence against local groups in opposition; (3) the roles and interrelations among local, national and transnational NGOs and peasant organizations; and (4) NGOs’ perception of the current state of the conflict and future forecasts. These are some of the factors have influenced the evolution of the conflict and explain its multifaceted nature, echoing what has happened in other flex-crops conflicts in Latin America (Marin-Burgos 2014).

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4 These arguments come from the minutes of three national peasants meeting against flex-crops in Guatemala (2009 and 2010).
In this essay, I consider NGOs as the organizations that give support to local communities and act as advocacy groups (Clarck 1991). I treat peasant organizations (CUC and UVOC) separately as I recognize they are based on grassroots memberships. In the text I will use the general term “organizations” when I refer to both of them.

**The Polochic Valley: sugarcane and oil palm expansion**

The Polochic Valley is located in northeastern Guatemala, in the departments of Alta Verapaz and Izabal (Figure 1). This agrarian frontier was officially reshaped in 1990, when two protected areas were established: the Sierra de las Minas Reserve (195,000 hectares) and the Sierra de Santa Cruz (72,000 hectares). These protected areas coexist with indigenous cultivators, the mining industry, traditional coffee estates and cattle ranchers, and more recently sugarcane and oil palm plantations. Eighty-nine per cent of the population is Maya-Q’eqchi’ and Poqomchi, found across 220 communities or in the towns of Tamahú, Tucurú, La Tinta, Senahú, Panzós and El Estor. The majority of indigenous inhabitants are landless or land poor, living from swidden (slash and burn) agriculture and complementing their subsistence-based livelihoods with cash-crop production or as seasonal workers (Alonso-Fradejas 2012).

According to the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (SAA), most recorded conflicts in the Polochic are due to “land occupations”, where private ownership is “not respected” by indigenous-peasant communities (SAA 2010). However, for those supporting the Polochic’s indigenous-peasant communities, the “occupations” are not the cause of the conflict, but the consequence (Hurtado 2008, Granovsky-Larsen 2013). They are rather their main strategy to access land for subsistence purposes given the unequal

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5 I included a variety of NGOs that defined themselves as human right organizations, foundations or research institutes.
distribution of arable land and the historical system of labor exploitation that characterizes the history of the Polochic (Castellanos Cambranes 1996, Van Leeuwen 2010, Hurtado 2008).

The chronicles of land conflict in the Polochic date back to the 16th century, when the Spanish Catholic Church controlled land and local populations through “Indian Villages” (Hurtado 2008). The commodification of land that started in the 19th century has continued until present, as land has been (re)concentrated to ease the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane plantations (Hurtado 2014). However, part of the Maya-Q’eqchi’ people have historically responded to these processes by fleeing wage labor controls, violence and the plunder of their lands, by migrating deeper into Guatemala in search of land to reproduce their livelihoods (Grandia 2006). Most of the Polochic is currently under the control of two oligarchic families, and even the communities that fled to forested areas are now in conflict with company and/or government-controlled protected areas, hydroelectric dams and mining projects (Hurtado 2014).

It was after the liberal reforms of the late 19th century that the state granted most of the land in the Polochic as private estates to foreign families and companies, in order to develop an export-oriented economy based on cattle, cotton, bananas and coffee plantations (Hurtado 2008; Grandia 2006). The Maya-Q’eqchi’ population that had previously lived in “Indian Villages” was forced to migrate or work on the estates as mozos-colonos or bonded laborers (Hurtado 2008). The patron provided a small piece of land on the estates for bonded laborers to grow their own food and, despite poor wages, forced families to purchase food from his own over-priced shop. Families were thus kept on estates under a flexible debt system (Piedrasanta 1977).

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6 The Spanish conquest of the Q’eqchi’ region (Alta Verapaz) was, relatively speaking, more peaceful than in the rest of Guatemala (Secaria 1992). However, during the conquest the Spanish church gathered the indigenous population in “Indian Villages” to appropriate their lands and more easily charge them taxes on behalf of the Spanish Crown.
The period of greatest violence and visibility of these conflicts on a transnational scale occurred during the 36 years of the Guatemalan civil war and concluded with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 (Sanford 2009, Grandin 2004). One of the most violent events happened in Panzós in 1978, when the army massacred fifty-three Maya-Q’eqchi’ peasants demanding access to land (CEH 1999). Thousands of people fled from the Polochic during the civil war (Grandia 2006). In the early 2000s the coffee crisis ended the mozos-colonos system (Wagner 2001), breaking the fetter between patrons and the bonded laborers’ families. In the wake of this rupture, some families were expelled from the estates without receiving any labor benefits and became landless while others stayed on the land as ‘squatters’ or became seasonal workers (Hurtado 2008, Grandia 2006).

Meanwhile, in 1998, the descendants of the German family Maegli set up an oil processing plant. And in 2005 a sugarcane mill called Chabil Utz’aj (‘good cane’ in the Q’eqchi’ language) owned by the Widdman family, was moved from the Southern Pacific region to the Polochic thanks to a two million dollar loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE). In the Polochic, these two oligarchic families currently control about 5,000 hectares of oil palm and 8,500 hectares of sugarcane plantations, making up one-third of the valley’s fertile land (Alonso-Fradejas 2012). These families were able to expand their flex-crop plantations throughout the territory either by purchasing land from cattle ranchers or by renting it for a five year period.

Part of the Maya-Q’eqchi’ population in the Polochic, some landless families, former bonded laborers, plantation workers and households with insecure land tenure are struggling to defend their territory against the expansion of flex-crops through a variety of collective and individual strategies (Alonso-Fradejas 2015). Consequently, in the past
two decades, the agrarian conflict in the Polochic has escalated around the land dispute between the two families that control the flex-crop production and the groups that claim that same land to grow staple crops (Hurtado 2014; Migorría et al 2014).

Over thirty per cent of the agrarian conflicts registered in Guatemala in 2010 were located in the Polochic (SAA 2010), but these were ‘invisible’ on a national and international scale between the signing of the Peace Accords (1996) and March, (2011), when the state violently evicted the Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities ‘occupying’ some estates in the Polochic, in an action that was highly mediatized (OACNUDH 2013; UDEFEGUA 2011; GIDHS 2013).

Two years later, after national and international demonstrations, some national and international NGOs and a national peasant organization depicted the government’s handover of land (partially outside of the Polochic) to some of the previously evicted families as the consequence of successful social mobilization and resistance (Velazquez 2014). Subsequently, all international and some national NGOs stopped paying attention to the struggle. However, violent conflict and the crops’ expansion continued as the government had failed to deal with the underlying roots of the problem, i.e. unequal land distribution in favor of a few oligarchic families and their agribusiness model. This paper argues that there were multiple factors affecting the exit of organizations and the seeming “success” of the case. I also discuss how structural violence, the role of the state, as well as the different strategies of organizations deployed, have contributed to weaken the resistance against flex-crops in the Polochic and to reveal or silence the conflict.

Methodological and analytical strategy
Data collection through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis and content analysis of the printed press and video documentaries (Figure 2), was triangulated to provide as complete a picture as possible of the conflict period. The analysis begins with the arrival of the oil palm and sugarcane plantations in 1998 and 2005 respectively, in the municipalities of Panzós and El Estor, and concludes at the end of 2014 when land was finally handed over to some of the evicted families.

<Insert FIGURE 2 METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES>

**Participant observation**

From my observations as a researcher and activist during three periods of fieldwork in the Polochic (January 2009-May 2011; January 2012; August 2014) I identified and interviewed members of the NGOs and peasant organizations that were involved in the conflict and opposed the expansion of flex-crops. I pinpointed the events that caused a change in the dynamic of the conflict in terms of its visibility/invisibility, the intensity of the violence exerted against the Q’eqchi’ communities and these organization roles and alliances. I evaluated the violence from very low (isolated evictions), to low (injuries, shootings and isolated evictions), high (injuries, shootings, kidnappings, violent and constant evictions) or very high (killings, injuries and shootings concentrated over days). I identified eight organization roles and four types of alliances (Table 1). Subsequently, I analyzed the general positions of Maya-Q’eqchi’ community members in relation to the conflict, focusing on those members who participated in national meetings organized by NGOs and a peasant organization to define strategies against flex-crops.

During the first period of fieldwork, I attended meetings with organizations and indigenous representatives, where resistance strategies against the expansion of oil palm
and sugarcane plantations in Guatemala were discussed\(^7\). At the same time, I lived with the Maya-Q’eqchi’ population during two active participant research projects\(^8\) in 2009 and 2011, and observed two land occupations in 2010 and the evictions of 2011. During these phases, I analyzed the information obtained from meeting minutes. The occupations and evictions were also recorded in two video-documentaries\(^9\) where I was part of the executive production, research and interview team. From this experience and the material it generated, I analyzed the arguments against the plantations by Maya-Q’eqchi’ people who attended the meetings, as well as the reasons presented by the oligarchic families’ to legitimize the evictions.

**Semi-structured interviews**

During 2014, I conducted a total of 17 interviews with representatives of 9 NGOs and 2 peasant organizations (Appendix). I categorized the organizations as *local, national* or *international (and/or donors)*, depending on their most common scale of operation; and as human rights, development and research and advocacy NGOs and peasant organizations depending on their focus and objectives (Appendix). These interviews served to: (1) validate the phases defined during participant observation; (2) analyze the roles of and interrelations between organizations; and 3) examine the organizations’ perceptions of the state of the conflict in the final stage of analysis (2014).

<Insert TABLE 1 ROLE AND ALLIANCE DEFINITIONS>

My different roles during the research process – as an “external” researcher, peasant organization consultant, human rights evaluator, scholar-activist and witness of the

\(^7\) This activity included three national (14 communities represented from the Polochic) and three regional (44 communities represented) meetings.

\(^8\) ‘Desarrollo de un marco de evaluación analítico-participativo de las dinámicas socioambientales y de la calidad de vida de las comunidades campesinas del Valle del río Polochic, Guatemala’. IDEAR-CONGCOOP, 2009-2010. Funded by ACCD. ‘Mecanismo de respuesta rápida frente a la fuerte subida de los precios de los productos alimenticios en los países en desarrollo’. CUC and FGT, 2010-2011. Funded by Oikos-EU.

\(^9\) The video-documentaries are titled: The evictions in the Polochic Valley 2011 and Aj Ral choch (Sons of the earth), 2012 and were co-produced by IDEAR-CONGCOOP and Caracolproducciones: (see [http://caracolproductions.net/](http://caracolproductions.net/)).
March 2011 evictions – allowed me to gain the trust of the majority of the interviewees and to show my commitment to what was happening on the ground. During the interviews I explained that I have continued researching the conflict in the Polochic for my personal interest, in order to contribute to activism in Guatemala. These elements helped me gather responses that were not accommodating and polite but diverse and critical.

**Content analysis**

I analyzed the content of three types of documents: written press, human right reports, and the two video-documentaries I was involved in producing. I used these three sources of information because I could not hold face-to-face interviews with all of the stakeholders in the conflict. This was due to the multiplicity of roles I had during my time in Guatemala, which were not aligned with the interests and rationale of the agribusiness families. The analysis was used to (1) validate the defined phases of the conflict through changes in its visibility; (2) identify the phases of greater and lesser visibility of the conflict through the number of news stories published; and (3) describe the changes in the arguments and stances of the oligarchic families and state institutions in relation to the causes of the conflict.

On the one hand, I compiled all news in Guatemala’s main newspapers (Prensa Libre, El Periódico, Diario de Centro América and Plaza Pública) from 1998 to 2014 and collected the references made on the conflict. I also included news that appeared from 2005 to 2014 found with the Google search term ‘Valle del Polochic’, resulting in a total of 160 articles. To analyze this material, I counted the number of news stories and opinion articles in each phase, conducted a lexicometrical analysis using the **Iramuteq** program to identify the predominant content published during the phases of the conflict and, additionally, analyzed the arguments and positions regarding the causes of the
conflict mobilized by all actors in each phase of the conflict. Finally, I reviewed the content of 10 reports on human rights violations and press releases by NGOs and peasant organizations that were published between 2000 and 2014. The content analysis involved identifying the strategies and complaints made by these organizations over time.

The evolution of the conflict

The visibility of the conflict from the arrival of oil palm and sugarcane plantations until 2014 has changed in relation to: the intensity of the violence and the organizations’ strategies, roles and alliances. Taking these criteria into consideration, I identified three phases of the conflict: 1) the silenced phase, from the arrival of the plantations in 1998 until the violent eviction of 12 Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities in 2011; 2) the revealed phase, from the evictions until a year later, in March 2012; and 3) the silencing phase, which began in March 2012 with the Indigenous, Peasant and Popular March and ended in 2014 with the government’s handover of land to less than a fifth of the evicted families (Table 2).

Silenced conflict (1998-2011)

Oil palm plantation expansion in the Polochic began silently in 1998. While conflicts were generated by this expansion (Hurtado 2008), they were not framed as such in the printed press. However, the expansion of sugarcane from 2005 was reported in two news articles as an opportunity to develop the local economy (see Dürr 2016 for a critical perspective). Oil palm and sugarcane underwent their greatest expansion during

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10 There are many possible reasons why the media did not report land grabbing conflicts and why there were no mobilizations. Although conflict related to land was still present, I think that the media and NGOs were focused on the discussion and promotion of 1996 Peace Accords. Land issues and indigenous rights were approached from this supposedly “post conflict phase”. Therefore, NGOs somehow left these conflicts behind and the media did not want to show a possible failure of the Peace Accords.
this phase, coming to occupy about 10,000 hectares of the Polochic (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, Hurtado 2008). Peasant organization in the region, promoted and supported the collective organization of the former bonded laborers to demand recognition of their land and labor rights, in some cases demanding monetary or land compensation, and in others settlements for their years of unpaid labor on the estates (Granovsky-Larsen 2013). From 2000 onwards, these peasant organizations gave their support to the land occupations in Tamahú, Tucurú and Senahú and promoted the creation of a unified front for the ‘recovery of the land’, organizing both the ‘landless’ population and the former bonded laborers (Hurtado 2008).

National and local NGOs (FGT in 1998, ECAP in 2000 and CONCAD in 2004), appeared in the region to provide psychosocial, technical and organizational support to the Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities. In 2005 CONGCOOP started working in the region, while other NGOs connected their work to the expansion of oil palm and sugarcane (Appendix). This date coincides with the transfer of the sugarcane mill from the Southern Pacific region to the Polochic (Figure 3).

<Insert FIGURE 3 TIME LINE PHASE SILENCED>

In 2008, after generating an atmosphere of trust, these organizations discussed with the local population the causes and elements of the conflict in the region. As a results, the NGOs highlighted the psychosocial problems associated with the civil war (Interview#1); the communities’ long and unresolved demands for access to land (Interview#10); and the socio-economic impacts of the rapid expansion of oil palm and sugarcane plantations and processing plants due to the current national policies that favor business groups and the global economic dynamics of flex-crops’ expansion (Alonso-Fradejas 2008, Solano and Solís 2010, Mingorria & Gamboa 2010).
In 2009, the five NGOs and two-peasant organization mentioned in the silenced phase formed a coalition to stop the advance of oil palm and sugarcane plantations. The coalition included a new research-based NGO, El Observador (Interview#12) (Figure 3). The formation of this coalition meant that the roles of most NGOs shifted from one of community support to facilitating horizontal interaction and joint resistance. To do this, they arranged three national peasant meetings in July 2009, November 2009 and August 2010 as well as two regional meetings in the Polochic, in August and September 2009 (Figure 3). These meetings aimed at exchanging information between organization and Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities, analyzing their different positions in relation to flex-crops and defining joint strategies against the expansion of flex-crops.

During these meetings, the Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities also expressed their opposition to flex-crops due to the socio-economic, cultural and environmental damage they generated. They hence defined lines of action aimed at defending their territory and reinforcing the internal cohesion and the networks between Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities. To do so, they formed the Council of Q’eqchi’ Communities in Resistance, which in 2010 decided to organize the occupation of ten sugarcane plantations in the Polochic. The objective of these occupations was pressure the government into buying the 37 estates owned by the Widdman family that were being auctioned at the time by Guatemala’s Industrial National Bank (BI), as a result of the sugarcane mill’s bankruptcy and not fulfilling its credit obligations (ElPeriódico August 6, 2010, Interview#12).

According to one Maya-Q’eqchi’ I spoke with, the occupations also came out of necessity, in order to plant maize, and as a form of resistance. He felt that “sowing[maize] is the struggle and the reason to keep on struggling” (Maya-Q’eqchi’ leader in occupied community, 2010). Likewise, during the ceremonies conducted
during the occupations, the spiritual value of maize and land for the Maya-Q’eqchi’,
compared to the negligent value of sugarcane was starkly apparent:

‘All the food collected in our home makes us who we are, but maize is our body.
Sugarcane is not of us, we do not sow it. We harvest beans, maize and chili.
Corncobs – the black, the yellow – are our body’ (Occupied community spiritual
guide, 2010).

However, the new wave of occupations was met with violent from the sugarcane
company’s private security forces (OACNUDH 2013). Given this intensification of the
conflict over access to land, the government organized several formal talks involving
state institutions, business people, community representatives and some national
organizations (Interview#5). Simultaneously, these organizations negotiated with the
government and the BCIE so that the state would buy the recently occupied land
(Interview#12). Despite the high intensity of the violence against the Maya-Q’eqchi’,
the conflict was not reported in the media, and the protests, negotiations, land
occupations and the subsequent repression were silenced on a national and international
scale (Table 2).

Revealed conflict (2011-2012)

In this phase the Polochic conflict became known nationally and internationally through
news articles and opinion pieces published in national and international media (Table
2), including a documentary about the evictions broadcasted on national television. This
phase covers both the violent conflict and post-eviction phases: the former involving the
eviction of 800 families from 12 communities in the Polochic; between the 15-and 19 of
March 2011. The post-eviction phase ran until March 2012 (Figure 4).
For the first time in Guatemala, 14 estates were included in the same court-issued eviction order (of which, 12 were executed). The Widdman family oversaw the evictions, accompanied by employees of the Public Ministry, the state agency in charge of executing court orders, and around 1000 soldiers and the national police (special operations commandos). The oligarchic families pressured the military into burning crops, deciding an exact date and time for the evictions, as to avoid being observed by organization members, and compelled the Ministry of Public Affairs to follow the judge’s orders. These power relations were explicitly described in statements by the Widdman family during the eviction recorded in the 2011 documentary titled “Polochic evictions”: “The Ministry told me: ‘well, this eviction is going to be very difficult,’ and I told him: ‘for God’s sake Minister, execute the order for seizure of the land issued by the competent judge! If not, you are obstructing the law.’”

Around 800 families were violently evicted, the National Civil Police killed a peasant, dozens of people were injured and the homes and 1,800 hectares of staple crops were razed or destroyed (OACNUDH 2013, UDEFEGUA 2011). Crop loss meant more than material damage: it was also spiritually and culturally painful. As one Maya Q’eqchi’ woman told me in an interview, “it is as if my son was dying, the land is no longer alive”. Moreover, for some of the population it was a throwback to the violence of the Civil War, where the military used the burning down of homes and crops as a strategy to prevent the population from returning to their villages (Interview#12, 9).

The presence of NGO and peasant organization members in the area meant that the news of the evictions reached the national and international press. Otherwise, the community did not have the authority or contacts to ensure media coverage of the violence enacted by the Widdman family and the government. In turn, these organizations held press conferences and publicly denounced the evictions, asking that
at the very least the evictions be carried out in a non-violent manner, leaving houses intact and allowing people to harvest their crops. These demands were however unaddressed.

In the wake of these violent events, five of the organizations in the coalition remained allied and once again changed their role to protest against the suffering of the families in the Polochic. The coalition condemned the violence, the excessive use of force by the army and the national police and the violation of the right to housing, food and indigenous culture in national and international venues, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) \(^\text{11}\) (Figure 4).

The Widdman family, however, accused the Maya-Q’eqchi’ population of violating the right to private land ownership and the NGOs and peasant organization of subverting the rule of law. During the evictions, that family proclaimed, “laws should be observed! Rule of law!” (Polochic evictions video-documentary 2011), while the government accused organizations of being “radicals that have systematically implemented illegal measures [...] that have affected the rights of other Guatemalans and put governability and the rule of law at great risk” (Presidential announcement 17/03/2015).

In June 2011, the IACHR requested Guatemala to take the necessary precautionary measures\(^\text{12}\) to guarantee the life, integrity, food and homes of the twelve evicted communities and to investigate the killing of one peasant during the evictions (OACNUDH 2013). In spite of such request, violence continued and three more peasants were killed a few months later (UDEFEGUA 2011). Some Maya-Q’eqchi’

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\(^{11}\) The IACHR: the main and autonomous agency of the Organization of American States (OAS) that is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in the Americas. A summary of the Precautionary Measures can be found at www.cidh.org with Ref: 14 comunidades indígenas Q’echi del Municipio de Panzos MC-121-11, Guatemala. The petitioning NGOs were: the CUC, FGT, ECAP, Human Rights Commission, Rights Action and ULAM (Women’s Union).

\(^{12}\) Precautionary measures: these are measures recommended to states by the IACHR when situations arise where irreparable damage could be caused to people. These include situations of conflict, violence or persecution of the defenders of human rights which if not ceased could lead to an increase in the number of deaths.
families tried to immediately occupy again the evicted lands, and the sugarcane company’s private security alongside the police responded again with violence (GIDHS 2013). Following the IACHR issue of the precautionary measures, the number of organizations in the coalition fell, and only three national organizations continued to condemn the events in alliance with international human rights NGOs. However, these relations also weakened (Figure 4).

Silencing conflict (2012-2014)

The conflict initially remained visible on a national and transnational scale, with public debates regarding the country’s history of agrarian conflict between March 2012 and February 2013. The content of the news items related the evictions in the Polochic to the violence of the Guatemalan civil war and the historic demands of the peasantry such as access to land, agrarian debt forgiveness, a law on Integrated Rural Development, the moratorium on mining licenses and territorial demilitarization (Table 2). However from February 2013-August 2014, the visibility of the conflict began to dwindle, with fewer stories being published in the national press and focusing solely on the relocation of the families (Table 2).

This visibility between March 2012 and February 2013 was largely due to the 200-kilometer Indigenous, Peasant and Popular March that took place in early 2012 (from Cobán municipality in Alta Verapaz department, to Guatemala City), and involved NGOs, peasant organizations, trade unions, community representatives and women’s organizations. The launch of an international campaign in favor of the evicted families (Crece-Vamos al grano), organized by Intermón Oxfam in February 2013, also increased the visibility of the conflict (Figure 5). These forms of protest emerged in response to the government’s non-compliance with the precautionary measures; i.e., the
violence continued, land was not provided, and not enough provisions were given to the evicted families (Interview#16, 4). The march was led by the CUC, and the FGT, CONGCOOP and representatives of the evicted communities also took part. After the demonstration, the Intermón Oxfam campaign managed to get the conflict onto the public agenda and put pressure on the government by revealing the social and financial plight of the evicted families through protest actions and delivering a petition with over 100,000 signatures to the government demanding land for the families. This campaign was coordinated in Guatemala exclusively by the CUC, preventing the participation of other national and international organizations. According to Oxfam, an alliance with a single organization made the campaign easier to manage. However, at the same time, this led to the breakdown of alliances with other organizations, and caused the CUC to shift from being a protest group to focus solely on the campaign agenda (Interview#17) (Figure 5).

Following the announcement of the land allocation to the Q’eqchi families in June 2013, the conflict’s apparent outcome was Janus-faced. On the one hand, success was touted in CUC, CONGCOOP and Intermón Oxfam’s reports, social networks and websites. These sources highlighted various achievements: land allocation for 140 families (Velazquez 2014); raising awareness of the global problem of land grabbing through the case of the Polochic; and achieving the international campaign targets. For example, the CUC celebrated the second handover of land with statements on its social networks such as “today our tears are the tears of joy: Victory for the violently evicted families and victory for national and international organizations!” (Facebook CUC 10th August 2014).

13 https://oxfamintermon.s3.amazonaws.com/sites/default/files/documentos/files/memoriaOxfamIntermon2014cas_0.pdf; https://www.facebook.com/Comite-de-Unidad-Campesina-CUC
On the other hand, however, during my fieldwork in August 2014 (the second land reallocation process), I realized that all organizations also perceived the outcomes partially as a failure. The structural problems regarding land access, the expansion of the plantations and the violence directed against the communities had not been resolved (Interview#4, 11, 8). The conflict was delocalized, with 110 families relocated away from the Polochic to another highly conflictive area of the country (Interview#2) without meeting minimal subsistence conditions.

Moreover, resistance in the Polochic had been weakened because the organizations fled the region and their alliances with Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities were debilitated. According to international human rights NGOs, the weakening of such alliances was the result of the difficulties of working in a human rights framework within contexts of systematic violence: “we could spend at least 14 years denouncing the state for not recognizing indigenous rights, however it is important to understand and to know how to do it” (Interview#8). The effort required to coordinate very different kinds of organizations was also repeated, as was the lack of time, financial resources and fatigue: “It was difficult to coordinate meetings and define actions, we were not all working along the same lines and information was not shared because of distrust” (Interview#10, Inverview#9). The direct alliances between Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities and national peasant and NGOs also weakened because of the increasing insecurity in the Polochic. “The situation became unsustainable, we received a lot of threats, you could tell that you were being followed ... it was not worth risking my life” (Interview#1).

Future perspectives of the Polochic conflict

Overall, after analyzing these three phases of the conflict in the Polochic from 1998 to 2014, it is evident that the government did not comply with its commitment to distribute
land among indigenous communities or halt the advancement of sugarcane and oil palm plantations. In 2014 the BCIE restructured the Widdman family’s outstanding debt, while an oligarchic family from Nicaragua (Grupo Pellas) bought 80 per cent of the company’s shares and further invested 40 million dollars in the sugarcane expansion project (Interview#3). This explains why most organization believed that the situation in the Polochic would only get worse after 2014, with the conflict intensifying and resistance being repressed.

The interviews, however, showed that there is no consensus within or among the organizations as to how the conflict in the Polochic should be approached from now on. Some international NGOs believe that the work should consist in putting pressure on the government through institutions such as the World Bank and involving other countries’ public opinion (Interview#17). However, some national peasant organizations and NGOs argued that the strategy should now consist in regionalizing the struggle and to work locally and the overarching objective would be to connect their fight with other struggles, such as the opposition to extractive projects such as mining and major hydroelectric plants.

Both proposals, campaigning from abroad and regionalizing resistance, are based on the development of alliances. However, while some national organizations vouch for alliances between international NGOs and their local partners, others aim to coordinate nationally through a United Peasant Front and to develop local alliances through community-based and grassroots organization. In all cases, nonetheless, organizations recognize the need to “overcome the broken ties between organizations” (Interview#10).

Discussion
The results section analyzed the typologies and visibility of the conflict in the Polochic from a multi-scale and temporal approach. They showed how the interrelations between violence/threat, the role of the state, and the type, strategies and alliances of NGOs and peasant organizations have influenced the visibility and dynamic of the conflict at different scales. The agrarian and human rights conflict was visible at all spatial scales (regional, national and international); the environmental conflict was only visible at peasant meetings.

The role of violence and fear in the Polochic conflict

The expansion of flex-crops in the Polochic has exacerbated the historical land dispute between the Maya-Q’eqchi’ communities and the oligarchic families. These communities have struggled for more than 500 years to recover the land they had been dispossessed from: beginning in the colonial era, through to liberal reforms and the development of the agro-export model of cotton, banana, beef and coffee farming (Hurtado 2008; Grandia 2009; Castellanos 1996), until the spread of oil palm and sugarcane plantations in the present day. In this new phase of dispossession, the demand for land has been visible through land occupations in the silenced phase, and protests and campaigns on a national and international scale during the revealed and silencing phases.

However, the high level of violence has been the main factor affecting the visibility of the conflict, focusing the debate and the struggle on land access issues and masking the communities’ arguments in relation to the environmental and cultural impacts of flex-crop. It is important to underline that the Polochic is not an isolated case: one of the main historical drivers of rural violence throughout Latin America is the unequal distribution of land (Kay 2001). The latter is also explicitly related to the mechanisms for the expansion of monocultures like oil palm plantations (Alonso-Fradejas 2012;
Violence in the Polochic is associated with the mechanisms of expansion and dispossession of land: direct violence recognized by human rights framework (NN.UU 2007). There was violence in all phases of the conflict, from threats, intimidation and the presence of the company’s armed private security to killings, kidnappings and violent evictions. This violence had a strong demobilizing effect, as it was applied to a population that had already been heavily repressed (Hurtado 2008). During all phases, violence, and the fear instilled in the minds of the Maya-Q’eqchi’ that lived through the Guatemalan civil war, suppressed the local indigenous people’s arguments against oil palm and sugarcane plantations. Social fear is a complex collective experience (Pain and Smith 2008) that can be unleashed by isolated events, such as the Panzós Massacre of 1978 (CEH 1999), and by everyday events, like the presence of private security forces, or symbols that bring back memories of the Guatemalan civil war, such as military uniforms, a scorched earth military strategy – burning of homes and crops – to ensure the permanent dispersal of the population, or government announcements outlawing protests.

In Guatemala, the threat of violence as a means to generate fear has been systematically used to muffle the peasant struggle for land in the past and in the present (Ibarra 2009). Scott (1986) argues that in contexts of strong repression and violence like those described earlier, the oppressed population develops silent resistance strategies and its oppositional arguments are only shared in secret. Scott (2008) argues that it is only when fear is overcome that visible rebellions and protest actions occur. However, the Maya-Q’eqchi’ occupied lands without having overcome their fear, driven instead by the need to feed themselves, by their indigenous identity that attributes a sacred value to the land and maize, and by the historic support of peasant organizations. However, the
state accused such occupiers of exercising violence, invading private property and fueling the conflict.

The role of organizations competing types, strategies and alliances in the conflict

The role and alliances between NGOs, peasant organizations and communities were also key factors for visibilizing the conflict on a national and international scale, in particular through organized claims and protests. These organizations gave financial and methodological support to the land occupations and the organization of peasant meetings during the silenced phase. During this phase, indigenous communities who depended directly on natural resources for subsistence defended their environment from the likely impacts of flex-crops. However, this “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez-Alier 2002) was not visible on a national or international scale – despite river diversion and contamination, soil degradation (Alonso-Fradejas 2012) –, probably because environmental organizations did not offer sufficient support. These results stand in stark contrast to those found on a transnational scale, where environmental organizations have led the protests against oil palm plantations on the grounds of their impacts to deforestation and biodiversity (Koh & Wilcove 2007; Venter et al 2008).

As the conflict developed, diverse national organizations and international human rights NGOs built alliances, which led to the conflict being depicted as one about rights in the revealed phase, and one about agrarian conflict in the silencing phase. These results coincide with other studies illustrating that both the type of organizations and the alliances between organizations involved in campaigns influence the visibility of a conflict and the arguments of those involved (Brad 2015; Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2015; Pye 2010; Wolford 2004). Alliances between environmental and agrarian organizations have contributed to depict some conflicts as agrarian or environmental struggles on a national and transnational scale, for example through campaigns against
climate change, agrofuels, deforestation and land grabbing (Pye 2010; Brad 2015), and
the development or breakdown of alliances between NGOs and peasant organizations
and the local population have also sometimes contributed to mask existing conflicts
(Wolford 2004; Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2015).

In the Polochic, the evolution of the conflict forced peasant organizations and NGOs to
change their strategies, and to form new alliances with international NGOs. Similar to
other violent agrarian conflicts, the organizations opted to condemn the violation of
human rights at the international, rather than the national level (Künne
mann and
Monsalve 2013, Marin-Burgos 2014). In Guatemala, where the economic power of
oligarchic families is historically linked to legislative and judicial power (Casaús-Arzú
2010), the human rights framework has not worked in favor of the demands of
Polochic’s indigenous population, where the right to life, food and housing continues to
be denied (OACNUDH 2013). In this case, most of the organizations involved in
support of disposed families are not self-identified as a human right organization,
however they used the rights framework in different ways, such as claiming the rights to
land, to food or to housing for indigenous and peasant communities.

According to Monsalve (2013), the functionality of the international human rights
framework (UN 1948) depends on the particular context and the extent to which the
framework itself has been developed. The results of this research illustrate that a human
rights framework does not by itself allow for an effective denunciation of what Galtung
(1969) would call “structural violence” or what Nixon (2011) terms “slow violence”.
The latter refers to the damage to marginalized populations that occurs continuously
through time and space, causing almost imperceptible socio-ecological changes (ibid.).
In this case, slow violence is the process of dispossession of the Maya-Q’eqchi’ population
of their resources through contamination process and the persistent denial of historical
rights to land of indigenous communities. This process has provoked, malnutrition, poverty, labor exploitation and the loss of biodiversity (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, Mingorría et al 2014).

As opposed to direct violence, this kind of “structural” or “slow violence” is more difficult to denounce in front of the IACHR or national courts since international NGO donors neither finance nor support long processes of denunciation. Difficulties also emerge from the mechanisms and language that would need to be used for such a purpose, requiring human rights “professionals”, and the coordination between national and international organizations and local communities. In addition, such “slow violence” is occurring in a falsely named post-conflict context. In the Polochic case, international human rights NGOs only intervened to denounce the incidents of direct violence when there was “proof” – photographs and witnesses – to present to international agencies.

The intervention and exit strategies of organizations also caused the conflict to be revealed or silenced. The interference of human rights and international development NGOs elevated the conflict to an international scale, at the same time that their exit or non-intervention silenced the conflict. Financial support was present in all phases of the conflict: from the logistics of the meetings against agro-fuels in the silenced phase, the human rights framework-based complaints and documentary filming in the revealed phase through to the march and the international campaign in the silencing phase. The strategy of the CUC in the silencing phase perhaps influenced by the international funds it had received from Oxfam to develop a more globally visible campaign. Once the campaign finished, the organizations’ involvement in the conflict dropped significantly. Although CUC has kept loyal to their own political agenda and principles,
they have been conditioned by a context of shrinking international development cooperation in the last ten years.

Moreover, the increased tensions between and within NGOs and peasant organizations due to mistrust, their different strategies and also their fatigue during that transition is likely to influence the Polochic struggle in the short-term future. Such tension and breakdown of alliances on an international scale occurred among the international human rights and national organizations. Over the course of the conflict, international NGOs pursued specific campaigning actions at international level, while national and local organizations diverged in their strategies depending on the type of organization that they were (development, research or peasant). In other studies, tensions have also been noted between organizations that seek to negotiate and define sustainability criteria with regard to oil palm production and those that are against the expansion of oil palm in and of itself (Borras 2015; Marin-Burgos 2014).

Conclusions

This article has argued that the level of violence and threat, the role of state, and the funding context of NGOs and peasant organization, their strategies and alliances involved have influenced the evolution of the flex-crops’ conflict in the Polochic. The support of peasant organizations, many of which had an origin in revolutionary guerrilla groups during Guatemala’s civil war, has played a key historical role in the defense of the territory and the struggle for land access (Alonso-Fradejas 2015). Their current role in the conflict over oil palm and sugarcane plantations in the Polochic has also been important, because they have acted as key community supporters and brokers of peasant demands in front of governmental institutions.

The analysis of the Polochic conflict has shown that the alliances between NGOs and the rural population have weakened over time, with a decrease in the number of NGOs
present in the region. Tensions and disagreement due to divergent strategies and ideologies have prevented the formation of a solid peasant movement (Bastos and Camus 2003). Direct violence and the threat of violence are key factors behind this weakening, associated with new dynamics in the expansion of flex-crops and the top-down advocacy in the silenced phased of the conflict by a few international and national NGOs. This has prevented local communities’ strategies from taking center stage. As a result of these dynamics, the Polochic conflict is publicly touted as one that is resolved although a concealed, conflict remains.

The triangulated methods used in this article have enabled me to observe possible contradictions between the results obtained from participant observation, semi-structured interviews and content analysis (Nightingale 2015). For example, content analysis showed the conflict to be resolved and successful in the silencing phase, but the interviews illustrated that it was still there and even more complex than in previous years. The results furthermore show the importance of a dynamic and multi-scale perspective in the analysis of conflict, since the visibility and nature of a conflict depends on the scale and moment of analysis and the stakeholders interviewed. Also, the results suggest that no transversal social movement has yet been created in the Polochic to effectively articulate environmental, social, cultural, economic and labor demands against flex-crops, or to address the tension between the sometimes divergent aims and strategies of NGOs, peasant organizations and the local indigenous population.

Future studies could conduct a historical analysis of the changes in the language used by Guatemalan agrarian and environmental justice movements to denounce structural violence that emerges in the expansion of flex-crops, and why such changes have occurred, as explored more generally in Central America (see Coklin et al 1995).
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### APPENDIX. - NGOs and peasant organizations classification by impact scale and focus

| NGOs and other organizations | Meaning of acronym and work areas related with the Polochic case | Interviewees | Operational scale of action | Focus on |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------|
| ECAP                         | Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción psicosocial (Community Study and Psychosocial Action Team) Provides psychosocial support to the victims of the Guatemalan Civil War | Former specialist member of the organization | National | Development |
| UVOC                         | Unión Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas (Verapaz Union of Peasant Organizations) Campaigns for integrated rural development through legal and organizational guidance with access to and use, tenancy and ownership of land, labor rights, community and productive development. Pressures for, negotiates and proposes laws before Congress. | One representative and one field specialist | National | Peasant |
| CUC                          | Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Peasant Unity) Campaigns for integrated rural development through legal and organizational guidance with access to and use, tenancy and ownership of land, labor rights, community and productive development. Pressures for, negotiates and proposes laws before Congress. | One representative and two field specialists | National | Peasant |
| **NGOs and other organizations** | **Meaning of acronym and work areas related with the Polochic case** | **Interviewees** | **Operational scale of action** | **Focus on** |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| CONGCOOP                      | *Coordinadora de ONGs y Cooperativas (NGO and cooperatives coordinator)*  
A consortium of research institutes and affiliates focused on the integrated rural development of the peasant population. As well as research, it makes proposals for public policies and shares information with organizations and the peasant population | Two researchers | National | Research and Development |
| CONCAD                        | *Consejo Cristiano de Agencias de Desarrollo (Christian Council of Development Agencies)*  
Affiliated to the CONGCOOP, in charge of fostering local power through participation on Community Development Boards in the municipalities of Panzós, Alta Verapaz | One representative | Regional | Development |
| FGT                           | *Fundación Guillermo Toriello*  
Fosters integrated rural development by supporting the legal security of the land, territorial planning and developing the community economy | One representative and one field specialist | National | Development |
| Action Aid                    | Promotes compliance with human rights among the landless peasantry and rural population by funding local organizations and condemning rural injustices | One representative and one researcher | International | Development (Also financial supporter) |
| NGOs and other organizations | Meaning of acronym and work areas related with the Polochic case | Interviewees | Operational scale of action | Focus on |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| El Observador                | Researches the socio-political and economic dynamics of Guatemala, paying special attention to the mechanisms for introducing monocultures and mining, hydroelectricity and hydrocarbon mega-projects | Ex-researcher | National | Research |
| HRC                          | *Human Rights Commission*<br>Presents and supports claims by the Guatemalan population whose human rights have been violated by extractive industries, abuses of military force (especially if supported by the USA) and abuses of the legal system | National coordinator | International | Human Rights |
| Right Action                 | On a local scale, supports the defenders of human rights that are at risk, supports condemnations of violations and on an international scale identifies and analyzes the parties responsible for violations and promotes activism in Northern Hemisphere countries and on all scales builds alliances to work for justice, equality, human rights and a fair environment and development | Coordinator and two field specialists | International | Human Rights |
| Intermon Oxfam               | International campaign to deliver land to 769 evicted families: funds reports on the situations of the evicted families, performs actions in different cities of the world, takes part in dialogues with the Guatemalan government, funds the CUC peasant organization | Latin American coordinator | International | NGO, Human Rights and Boosting the peasant economy |
Table 1. - Definitions of the main roles attached to NGOs during the Polochic conflict

| Role                        | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Counterpart/partner         | Serve as the voice and image that responds to the agenda and requirements of another organization that has the resources                                                                                     |
| Denunciation                | Obtain information about the origin of the conflict and hold press conferences, issue press releases or transfer information to other organizations that influence international agencies. Present the information to international agencies |
| Facilitation                | Support collective strategy-defining processes: provide information, coordinate joint events, fund meetings, offer a collective identity to the peasantry                                                        |
| Mobilization of resources   | Fundraise from local and foreign sources to organize major campaigns and large-scale mobilizations                                                                                                         |
| Negotiation with the State  | Present arguments to state institutions and discuss and agree to measures                                                                                                                                   |
| Protest                     | Organize and coordinate protests such as demonstrations and strikes                                                                                                                                          |
| Research                    | Conduct studies of the causes of the conflict                                                                                                                                                            |
| Support                     | Support communities with their everyday needs: legal, organizational and technical guidance                                                                                                             |
| Type of alliances           |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Coalition                   | Four or more networked organizations                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Strong alliances            | Less than four networked organizations and a trust relationship                                                                                                                                              |
| Weak alliances              | Less than four networked organizations but lack of trust relationship                                                                                                                                     |
Table 2. –Characterization of the phases of the conflict: Intensity of the conflict, narratives of new stories, roles and alliances of NGOs.

|                         | Silenced (1998-2011) | Revealed (2011-2012) | Silencing (2012-2014) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| **Visibility**          | Latent                | Visible               | Visible                |
| Scale of visibility (number of news items) | Regional (2) | National and transnational (59) | National and transnational (29) | Regional (16) |
| Intensity of violence   | High                  | Very high             | High                   |
| Iramuteq cluster analysis (% news items) | -                     | Class 3 (49.2%): Eviction, Police, peasant death, rights | Class 2 (27.9%): Rural development, demands, land | Class 1(22.9%): Struggle, desire to work |
| Type of NGOs by operational scale of action (number of organizations) | Local (1) National (6) Transnational (1) | Local (1) National (5) Transnational (3) | Local (1) National (4) Transnational (1) | Local (1) National (3) Transnational (1) |
| Type of organization by focus (organizations’ acronyms) | Participation COCAD Peasant UVOC, CUC Psychosocial ECAP Research CONGCOOP Action Aid, El Observador Fostering Peasant Economies CONGCOOP, FGT | Participation COCAD Peasant UVOC, CUC Psychosocial ECAP Research CONGCOOP Action Aid, Fostering Peasant Economies CONGCOOP, FGT Human Rights HRC, Right Action, | Participation COCAD Peasant UVOC, CUC Research CONGCOOP Action Aid, Fostering Peasant Economies CONGCOOP, FGT | Participation COCAD Peasant UVOC, CUC Research Action Aid, Fostering Peasant Economies FGT |
| Roles (organizations’ acronyms) | Silenced (1998-2011) | Revealed (2011-2012) | Silencing (2012-2014) |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| **Support**                      | (COCAD, UVOC, ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT) | (CONCAD, UVOC)        | (CONCAD, UVOC)        |
| **Facilitation**                 | (COCAD, ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, El Observador, FGT, Action Aid) | Denunciation (ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT, HRC, Right Action, Action Aid) | Protest (CUC, FGT) |
| **Negotiation**                  | (CUC, FGT, Action Aid) | | Negotiation (CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT) |
| **Research**                     | (CONGCOOP, Action Aid) | | Mobilization of Resources (Intermon Oxfam) |

| Alliances (number of organizations) | - | Strong coalition (7) | Strong coalition (5) and weak alliances ((5) and (2)) | Weak alliances ((1) and (3)) |
|------------------------------------|---|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                                    |   |                      |                                                      | Weak alliance ((1) and (1)) |
|                                    |   |                      |                                                      | Weak alliance ((1) and (1)) |

The principal scale of action is regional
The principal scale of action is national
The principal scale of action is international
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Case study area: The Polochic Valley

Source: Mingorría et al (2014). The red area represents the oil palm plantations, the yellow area represents the sugar cane plantations and the green area demarcates the *Sierra de las Minas* and *Bocas del Polochic* protected areas.

Figure 2. Methodological strategy and research objectives

Figure 3. Conflict dynamics during the Silenced phase: NGOs alliances and main events

Figure 4. Conflict dynamics during the Revealed phase: NGOs alliances and main events

Figure 5. Conflict dynamics during the Silencing phase: NGOs alliances and main events
Figure 1. Case study area: The Polochic Valley.
Source: Own elaboration based on information from Geographic Information System of Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food of Guatemala (SIG-MAGA); and observations during the fieldwork. The black polygons represents the oil palm plantations, the white polygons represents the sugar cane plantations and the grey polygons demarcates the Sierra de las Minas and Bocas del Polochic protected areas.
Figure 2. Methodological strategy and research objectives.
Figure 3. Conflict dynamics during the Silenced phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.
Figure 4. Conflict dynamics during the Revealed phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.
Figure 5. Conflict dynamics during the Silencing phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.