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

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

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

23 **Introduction**

24 In recent decades, the expansion of large areas of so-called flex-crops¹, such as oil palm
25 (*Elaeis guineensis*) and sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*), has led to major social and
26 environmental change in Southeast Asia and Latin America (Borras et al 2011; FAO
27 2014). This expansion started in 1990 (Asia) and 2000 (Latin America) due to the
28 intensifying demand in the Northern Hemisphere for agrofuels², edible oils, industrial
29 lubricants and cosmetics in the case of oil palm. Sugarcane was similarly sought after in
30 order to produce agrofuels, animal feed or fertilizers. Demand for both flex-crops has
31 also been driven from emerging centers of international capital in the Southern
32 Hemisphere, the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and
33 some middle-income countries (MICs) (Borras et al 2015). Forecasts suggest that by
34 2020 the variety and quantity of products fabricated from both crops will only continue
35 to increase (Alonso-Fradejas et al 2016; MacKay et al 2015). Producer countries are
36 thus facilitating the identification, quantification and provision of ‘suitable’ land for
37 such crops (Borras et al 2013), under the assumption that there are marginal
38 (unpopulated) lands which are apt for cultivation and that these flex-crops can solve
39 manifold energy, climate, economic and financial crises (World Bank 2010).

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

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 Vía Campesina 6/06/07). In this article, I use agrofuel as a synonym for biofuel.

46 fertility and increased water and air pollution (Goldemberg et al 2008; Martinelli and
47 Filoso 2008). Moreover, social differentiation characterizes oil palm plantations, where
48 the poorest smallholders, the landless and women – often overlapping categories – are
49 oftentimes unable to reap the benefits from cultivation or employment (Alonso-Fradejas
50 2012; Cardenas 2012; Mingorría et al 2014).

51 Many of these negative impacts could be expressed as environmental³ and/or agrarian
52 conflicts (Dietz et al 2014; Alonso-Fradejas 2015; Gerber 2011), which may sometimes
53 be made visible by environmental, climatic or agrarian justice movements in
54 transnational campaigns against agrofuels, deforestation or land grabbing (Pye 2010;
55 Brad 2015; Borrás et al 2013). However, such impacts may not become visible at a
56 national or international scale, but only at a local scale in **certain** phases of the conflict
57 (Marin-Burgos 2014). With visibility I refer to conflicts **that** appear in **national and**
58 **international** newspapers and **are** the object of public demonstrations. In this essay I
59 assess visibility by considering any reference to the conflict in national and international
60 media sources, specifically the printed press. In other cases **in Latin America** such
61 visibility has conditioned the “success” of struggles against oil palm plantations and the
62 decisions to change strategies of resistance (Marin-Burgos 2014).

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

³ This includes conflicts known as ecological, ecological-distributive, socio-environmental or ecological-social and conflicts with environmental content.

70 example of a conflict that has been visibilized is the accelerated expansion of oil palm
71 in Indonesia, where European and Indonesian environmental and agrarian movements
72 have developed transnational campaigns from shared anti-agrofuel activism. The
73 campaigns highlighted the loss of biodiversity, problems of climate change,
74 dispossession of land and the violation of human rights associated with oil palm
75 plantations (Pye 2010; Grajales 2015; Brad 2015). According to Pye (2010), the anti-
76 agrofuels **campaign** has been successful in: (1) creating transnational debates **regarding**
77 the main environmental impacts of oil palm plantations and agrofuel production; (2)
78 forging **alliances** between Indonesian grassroots movements and transnational
79 movements; (3) **linking** environmental problems with agrarian and human rights issues;
80 and (4) including sustainability criteria on agrofuel production in the European
81 Renewable Energy Directive (EU 2008, article 17).

82 Recently, studies of oil palm and sugarcane plantation-related conflicts have focused on
83 understanding the role played by agrarian and environmental NGOs at regional
84 (Wolford 2004), national (Brad 2014), and transnational (Pye 2010) scales; or on
85 exploring the conflict from the perspective of local populations (Castellanos-Navarrete
86 and Jansen 2014; Edelmán and León 2013; Alonso-Fradejas 2015). This article
87 contributes to this body of literature by identifying the factors that have influenced the
88 visibility of conflict generated by flex-crops in the Polochic Valley (hereinafter
89 ‘Polochic’), Guatemala. In this region, three quarters of the fertile land (more than
90 10,000 hectares) have been occupied by oil palm and sugarcane **plantations** since 1998
91 and 2005 respectively (Alonso-Fradejas et al 2012; Mingorria et al 2014), resulting in
92 recurring and state-acknowledged land conflicts (SAA 2014). However, these conflicts
93 only became internationally known in 2011, **after** NGOs denounced ongoing violations
94 of land and human rights (OACNUDH 2013).

95 When I talk about conflicts in this article, I refer to disputes and confrontations, visible
96 or **invisible, which occur** as a result of flex-crops plantations and/or their expansion.
97 Such disputes can be **related to** their environmental impacts, potentially resulting in
98 changes in land tenure and resource access relations, and over labor rights and working
99 conditions (Borras et al 2010; Marin-Burgos 2014). In the Polochic, oil palm and
100 sugarcane plantation conflict is manifested through **Q'eqchi' groups and a diverse types**
101 **of social organizations in** opposition to the expansion of flex-crops that are controlled
102 by two oligarchic families present in the Polochic. The main arguments in opposition to
103 this expansion are that the growth of flex-crops has generated water pollution,
104 exploitative labor conditions and/or the impossibility of Q'eqchi' population to access
105 land; as well as direct violence, **which is understood by Q'eqchi' groups, in similar way**
106 **as that describe by WHO (1996)** individual physical and physiological harm or subtle
107 forms of coercion⁴.

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

⁴ These arguments come from the minutes of three national peasants meeting against flex-crops in Guatemala (2009 and 2010).

119 In this essay, I consider NGOs⁵ as the organizations that give support to local
120 communities and act as advocacy groups (Clarck 1991). I treat peasant organizations
121 (CUC and UVOC) separately as I recognize they are based on grassroots memberships.
122 In the text I will use the general term “organizations” when I refer to both of them.

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

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

135 <Insert Figure 1: POLOCHIC VALLEY>

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

⁵ I included a variety of NGOs that defined themselves as human right organizations, foundations or research institutes.

142 distribution of arable land and the historical system of labor exploitation that
143 characterizes the history of the Polochic (Castellanos Cambranes 1996, Van Leeuwen
144 2010, Hurtado 2008).

145 The chronicles of land conflict in the Polochic date back to the 16th century, when the
146 Spanish Catholic Church controlled land and local populations through “Indian
147 Villages”⁶ (Hurtado 2008). The commodification of land that started in the 19th century
148 has continued until present, as land has been (re)concentrated to ease the expansion of
149 oil palm and sugarcane plantations (Hurtado 2014). However, part of the Maya-
150 Q’eqchi’ people have historically responded to these processes by fleeing wage labor
151 controls, violence and the plunder of their lands, by migrating deeper into Guatemala in
152 search of land to reproduce their livelihoods (Grandia 2006). Most of the Polochic is
153 currently under the control of two oligarchic families, and even the communities that
154 fled to forested areas are now in conflict with company and/or government-controlled
155 protected areas, hydroelectric dams and mining projects (Hurtado 2014).

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

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.

165 The period of greatest violence and visibility of these conflicts on a transnational scale
166 occurred during the 36 years of the Guatemalan civil war and concluded with the
167 signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 (Sanford 2009, Grandin 2004). One of the most
168 violent events happened in Panzós in 1978, when the army massacred fifty-three Maya-
169 Q'eqchi' peasants demanding access to land (CEH 1999). Thousands of people fled
170 from the Polochic during the civil war (Grandia 2006). In the early 2000s the coffee
171 crisis ended the *mozos-colonos* system (Wagner 2001), **breaking the fetter between**
172 **patrons and the bonded laborers' families. In the wake of this rupture, some families**
173 **were expelled from the estates without receiving any labor benefits and became landless**
174 while others stayed on the land as 'squatters' or became seasonal workers (Hurtado
175 2008, Grandia 2006).

176 Meanwhile, in 1998, the descendants of the German family Maegli set up an oil
177 processing plant. And in 2005 a sugarcane mill called *Chabil Utz' aj* ('good cane' in the
178 Q'eqchi' language) owned by the Widdman family, was moved from the Southern
179 Pacific region to the Polochic thanks to a two million dollar loan from the Central
180 American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE). In the Polochic, these two oligarchic
181 families currently control about 5,000 hectares of oil palm and 8,500 hectares of
182 sugarcane plantations, making up one-third of the valley's fertile land (Alonso-Fradejas
183 2012). These families were able to expand their flex-crop plantations throughout the
184 territory either by purchasing land from cattle ranchers or by renting it for a five year
185 period.

186 Part of the Maya-Q'eqchi' population in the Polochic, some landless families, former
187 bonded laborers, plantation workers and households with insecure land tenure are
188 struggling to defend their territory against the expansion of flex-crops through a variety
189 of collective and individual strategies (Alonso-Fradejas 2015). Consequently, in the past

190 two decades, the agrarian conflict in the Polochic has **escalated around the land dispute**
191 **between the two families that control the flex-crop production and the groups that claim**
192 **that same land to grow staple crops** (Hurtado 2014; Migorría et al 2014).

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

199 Two years later, after national and international demonstrations, some **national and**
200 **international NGOs and a national peasant organization** depicted the government’s
201 handover of land (partially outside of the Polochic) to some of the previously evicted
202 families as the consequence of successful social mobilization and resistance (Velazquez
203 2014). Subsequently, all international and some national NGOs **stopped paying**
204 **attention to the struggle**. However, violent conflict and the crops’ expansion continued
205 as the government had **failed to deal** with the underlying roots of the problem, i.e.
206 unequal land distribution in favor of a few oligarchic families and their agribusiness
207 model. This paper argues that there were multiple factors affecting the exit of
208 **organizations** and the seeming “success” of the case. I also discuss how structural
209 violence, the role of the state, as well as the different strategies **of organizations**
210 **deployed**, have contributed to weaken the resistance against flex-crops in the Polochic
211 and to reveal or silence the conflict.

212

213 **Methodological and analytical strategy**

214 Data collection **through** participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discourse
215 analysis and content analysis of the printed press and video documentaries (Figure 2),
216 **was** triangulated to provide as complete a picture as possible of the conflict period. The
217 analysis begins with the arrival of the oil palm and sugarcane plantations in 1998 and
218 2005 respectively, in the municipalities of Panzós and El Estor, and concludes at the
219 end of 2014 when land was finally handed over **to some of the** evicted families.

220 <Insert FIGURE 2 METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES>

221 ***Participant observation***

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

236 During the first period of fieldwork, I attended meetings with **organizations** and
237 indigenous representatives, where **resistance strategies against the expansion** of oil palm

238 and sugarcane plantations in Guatemala were discussed⁷. At the same time, I lived with
239 the Maya-Q'eqchi' population during two active participant research projects⁸ in 2009
240 and 2011, and observed two land occupations in 2010 and the evictions of 2011. During
241 these phases, I analyzed the information obtained from meeting minutes. The
242 occupations and evictions were also recorded in two video-documentaries⁹ where I was
243 part of the executive production, research and interview team. From this experience and
244 the material it generated, I analyzed the arguments against the plantations by Maya-
245 Q'eqchi' people who attended the meetings, as well as the reasons presented by the
246 oligarchic families' to legitimize the evictions.

247 *Semi-structured interviews*

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

256 <Insert TABLE 1 ROLE AND ALLIANCE DEFINITIONS>

257 My different roles during the research process – as an “external” researcher, peasant
258 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://caracolproducciones.net/>).

259 **March 2011 evictions** – allowed me to gain the trust of the majority of the interviewees
260 and to show my commitment to what was happening on the ground. During the
261 interviews I explained that I have continued researching the conflict in the Polochic for
262 my personal interest, in order to contribute to activism in Guatemala. These elements
263 helped me gather responses that were not accommodating and polite but diverse and
264 critical.

265 *Content analysis*

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

276 On the one hand, I compiled all news in Guatemala's main newspapers (*Prensa Libre*,
277 *El Periódico*, *Diario de Centro América* and *Plaza Pública*) from 1998 to 2014 and
278 **collected the references made on the** conflict. I also included news that appeared from
279 2005 to 2014 found with the *Google* search term 'Valle del Polochic', resulting in a
280 total of 160 articles. To analyze this material, I counted the number of news stories and
281 opinion articles in each phase, conducted a lexicometrical analysis using the *Iramuteq*
282 program to identify the predominant content published during the phases of the conflict
283 and, additionally, analyzed the arguments and positions regarding the causes of the

284 conflict mobilized by all actors in each phase of the conflict. Finally, I reviewed the
285 content of 10 reports on human rights violations and press releases by NGOs and
286 peasant organizations that were published between 2000 and 2014. The content analysis
287 involved identifying the strategies and complaints made by these organizations over
288 time.

289 **The evolution of the conflict**

290 The visibility of the conflict from the arrival of oil palm and sugarcane plantations until
291 2014 has changed in relation to: the intensity of the violence and the organizations'
292 strategies, roles and alliances. Taking these criteria into consideration, I identified three
293 phases of the conflict: 1) the *silenced phase*, from the arrival of the plantations in 1998
294 until the violent eviction of 12 Maya-Q'eqchi' communities in 2011; 2) *the revealed*
295 *phase*, from the evictions until a year later, in March 2012; and 3) *the silencing phase*,
296 which began in March 2012 with the Indigenous, Peasant and Popular March and ended
297 in 2014 with the government's handover of land to less than a fifth of the evicted
298 families (Table 2).

299 <Insert TABLE 2 PHASES CHARACTERIZATION>

300 ***Silenced conflict (1998-2011)***

301 Oil palm plantation expansion in the Polochic began **silently** in 1998. While conflicts
302 were generated by this expansion (Hurtado 2008), they were not framed as such in the
303 printed press¹⁰. However, the expansion of sugarcane from 2005 was reported in two
304 news articles as an opportunity to develop the local economy (see Dürr 2016 for a
305 critical perspective). Oil palm and sugarcane underwent their greatest expansion during

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.

306 this phase, coming to occupy about 10,000 hectares of the Polochic (Alonso-Fradejas
307 2012, Hurtado 2008). **Peasant organization** in the region, promoted and supported the
308 collective organization of the former bonded laborers to demand recognition of their
309 land and labor rights, in some cases demanding monetary or land compensation, and in
310 others settlements for their years of unpaid labor on the estates (Granovsky-Larsen
311 2013). From 2000 **onwards**, these peasant **organizations** gave their support to the land
312 occupations in Tamahú, Tukurú and **Senahú** and promoted **the creation of a unified front**
313 for the ‘recovery of the land’, organizing both the ‘landless’ population and the former
314 bonded laborers (Hurtado 2008).

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

321 <Insert FIGURE 3 TIME LINE PHASE SILENCED>

322 In 2008, after generating an atmosphere of trust, **these organizations discussed with the**
323 **local population the causes and elements of the conflict in the region. As a results, the**
324 **NGOs** highlighted the psychosocial problems associated with the civil war
325 (Interview#1); the communities’ long and unresolved demands for access to land
326 (Interview#10); and the socio-economic impacts of the rapid expansion of oil palm and
327 sugarcane plantations and processing plants due to the current national policies that
328 favor business groups and the global economic dynamics of flex-crops’ expansion
329 (Alonso-Fradejas 2008, Solano and Solís 2010, Mingorria & Gamboa 2010).

330 In 2009, the **five NGOs and two-peasant organization** mentioned in the *silenced phase*
331 formed a coalition to stop the advance of oil palm and sugarcane plantations. The
332 coalition included a new research-based NGO, *El Observador* (Interview#12) (Figure
333 3). The formation of this coalition meant that the roles of most NGOs shifted from one
334 of community support to facilitating horizontal interaction and joint resistance. To do
335 this, they arranged three national peasant meetings in July 2009, November 2009 and
336 August 2010 as well as two regional meetings in the Polochic, in August and September
337 2009 (Figure 3). These meetings aimed at exchanging information between **organization**
338 and Maya-Q'eqchi' communities, analyzing their different positions in relation to flex-
339 crops and defining joint strategies against the expansion of **flex-crops**.

340 During these meetings, the Maya-Q'eqchi' communities also expressed their opposition
341 to **flex-crops due to** the socio-economic, cultural and environmental damage they
342 generated. They hence defined lines of action aimed at defending their territory and
343 reinforcing the internal cohesion and the networks between Maya-Q'eqchi'
344 communities. To do so, they formed the Council of Q'eqchi' Communities in
345 Resistance, which in 2010 decided to organize the occupation of ten sugarcane
346 plantations in the Polochic. The objective of these occupations was pressure the
347 government into buying the 37 estates owned by the Widdman family that were being
348 auctioned at the time by **Guatemala's Industrial National Bank (BI)**, as a result of the
349 sugarcane **mill's bankruptcy** and not fulfilling **its** credit obligations (El Periódico August
350 6, 2010, Interview#12).

351 According to one Maya-Q'eqchi' I spoke with, the occupations also came out of
352 necessity, in order to plant maize, and as a form of resistance. He felt that
353 *“sowing[maize] is the struggle and the reason to keep on struggling”* (Maya-Q'eqchi'
354 leader in occupied community, 2010). Likewise, during the ceremonies conducted

355 during the occupations, the spiritual value of maize and land for the Maya-Q'eqchi',
356 compared to the negligent value of sugarcane was starkly apparent:

357 *'All the food collected in our home makes us who we are, but maize is our body.*
358 *Sugarcane is not of us, we do not sow it. We harvest beans, maize and chili.*
359 *Corncoobs – the black, the yellow – are our body'* (Occupied community spiritual
360 guide, 2010).

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

371 ***Revealed conflict (2011-2012)***

372 In this phase the Polochic conflict became known nationally and internationally through
373 news articles and opinion pieces published in national and international media (Table
374 2), including a documentary about the evictions broadcasted on national television. This
375 phase covers both the violent conflict and post-eviction phases: the former involving the
376 eviction of 800 families from 12 communities in the Polochic; between the 15-and 19 of
377 March 2011. The post-eviction phase ran until March 2012 (Figure 4).

378 <Insert FIGURE 4 TIMELINE PHASE REVEALED>

379 For the first time in Guatemala, 14 estates were included in the same court-issued
380 eviction order (of which, 12 were executed). The Widdman family oversaw the
381 evictions, accompanied by employees of the Public Ministry, the state agency in charge
382 of executing court orders, and around 1000 soldiers and the national police (special
383 operations commandos). The oligarchic families pressured the military into burning
384 crops, deciding an exact date and time for the evictions, as to avoid being observed by
385 organization members, and compelled the Ministry of Public Affairs to follow the
386 judge's orders. These power relations were explicitly described in statements by the
387 Widdman family during the eviction recorded in the 2011 documentary titled "Polochic
388 evictions": *"The Ministry told me: 'well, this eviction is going to be very difficult,' and I*
389 *told him: 'for God's sake Minister, execute the order for seizure of the land issued by*
390 *the competent judge! If not, you are obstructing the law.'"*

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

399 The presence of NGO and peasant organization members in the area meant that the
400 news of the evictions reached the national and international press. Otherwise, the
401 community did not have the authority or contacts to ensure media coverage of the
402 violence enacted by the Widdman family and the government. In turn, these
403 organizations held press conferences and publicly denounced the evictions, asking that

404 at the very least the evictions be carried out in a non-violent **manner**, leaving houses
405 intact and allowing people to harvest their crops. These demands were however
406 unaddressed.

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

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

420 In June 2011, the IACHR requested Guatemala to take the necessary precautionary
421 measures¹² to guarantee the life, integrity, food and homes of the twelve evicted
422 communities and to investigate the killing of one peasant during the evictions
423 (OACNUDH 2013). In spite of such request, violence continued and three more
424 peasants were killed a few months later (UDEFEQUA 2011). Some Maya-Q'eqchi'

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'eqchi 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.

425 families tried to immediately occupy again the evicted lands, and the sugarcane
426 company's private security alongside the police responded again with violence (GIDHS
427 2013). Following the IACHR issue of the precautionary measures, the number of
428 organizations in the coalition fell, and only three national organizations continued to
429 condemn the events in alliance with international human rights NGOs. However, these
430 relations also weakened (Figure 4).

431 *Silencing conflict (2012-2014)*

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

441 <Insert FIGURE 5 TIMELINE PHASE SILENCING>

442 This visibility between March 2012 and February 2013 was largely due to the 200-
443 kilometer Indigenous, Peasant and Popular March that took place in early 2012 (from
444 Cobán municipality in Alta Verapaz department, to Guatemala City), and involved
445 NGOs, peasant organizations, trade unions, community representatives and women's
446 organizations. The launch of an international campaign in favor of the evicted families
447 (*Crece-Vamos al grano*), organized by Intermón Oxfam in February 2013, also
448 increased the visibility of the conflict (Figure 5). These forms of protest emerged in
449 response to the government's non-compliance with the precautionary measures; i.e., the

450 violence continued, land was not provided, and not enough provisions were given to the
451 evicted families (Interview#16, 4). The march was led by the CUC, and the FGT,
452 CONGCOOP and representatives of the evicted communities also took part. After the
453 demonstration, the Intermón Oxfam campaign managed to get the conflict onto the
454 public agenda and put pressure on the government by revealing the social and financial
455 plight of the evicted families through protest actions and delivering a petition with over
456 100,000 signatures to the government demanding land for the families. This campaign
457 was coordinated in Guatemala exclusively by the CUC, preventing the participation of
458 other national and international **organizations**. According to Oxfam, an alliance with a
459 single **organization** made the campaign easier to manage. However, at the same time,
460 this led to the breakdown of alliances with other **organizations**, and caused the CUC to
461 shift from being a protest group to focus **solely** on the campaign agenda (Interview#17)
462 (Figure 5).

463 Following the announcement of the land **allocation to the Q'eqchi families** in June
464 2013, the conflict's apparent outcome was Janus-faced. On the one hand, success was
465 touted in CUC, CONGCOOP and Intermón Oxfam's reports, social networks and
466 websites.¹³ These sources highlighted various achievements: land allocation for 140
467 families (Velazquez 2014); raising awareness of the global problem of land grabbing
468 through the case of the Polochic; and achieving the international campaign targets. For
469 example, the CUC celebrated the second handover of land with statements on its social
470 networks such as "today our tears are the tears of joy: Victory for the violently evicted
471 families and victory for national and international organizations!" (Facebook CUC 10th
472 August 2014).

13

https://oxfamintermon.s3.amazonaws.com/sites/default/files/documentos/files/memoriaOxfamIntermon2014cas_0.pdf;
<https://www.facebook.com/Comité-de-Unidad-Campesina-CUC>

473 On the other hand, **however**, during my fieldwork in August 2014 (the second land
474 reallocation process), I realized that all **organizations** also perceived the outcomes
475 partially as a failure. The structural problems regarding land access, the expansion of
476 the plantations and the violence **directed against** the communities had not been resolved
477 (Interview#4, 11, 8). The conflict was delocalized, with 110 families relocated away
478 from the Polochic to another highly conflictive area of the country (Interview#2)
479 without meeting minimal subsistence conditions.

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

495 **Future perspectives of the Polochic conflict**

496 Overall, after analyzing these three phases of the conflict in the Polochic from 1998 to
497 2014, it is evident that the government did not comply with its commitment to distribute

498 land among indigenous communities or halt the advancement of sugarcane and oil palm
499 plantations. In 2014 the BCIE restructured the Widdman family's outstanding debt,
500 while an oligarchic family from Nicaragua (Grupo Pellas) bought 80 per cent of the
501 company's shares and further invested 40 million dollars in the sugarcane expansion
502 project (Interview#3). This explains why most organization believed that the situation in
503 the Polochic would only get worse after 2014, with the conflict intensifying and
504 resistance being repressed.

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

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

521 **Discussion**

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

529 *The role of violence and fear in the Polochic conflict*

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

540 However, the high level of violence has been the main factor affecting the visibility of
541 the conflict, focusing the debate and the struggle on land access issues and masking the
542 communities' arguments in relation to the environmental and cultural impacts of flex-
543 crop. It is important to underline that the Polochic is not an isolated case: one of the
544 main historical drivers of rural violence throughout Latin America is the unequal
545 distribution of land (Kay 2001). The latter is also explicitly related to the mechanisms
546 for the expansion of monocultures like oil palm plantations (Alonso-Fradejas 2012;

547 Grajales 2015; Maher 2015; Edelmán and León 2013). Violence in the Polochic is
548 associated with the mechanisms of expansion and dispossession of land: direct violence
549 recognized by human rights framework (NN.UU 2007). There was violence in all
550 phases of the conflict, from threats, intimidation and the presence of the company's
551 armed private security to killings, kidnappings and violent evictions. This violence had
552 a strong demobilizing effect, as it was applied to a population that had already been
553 heavily repressed (Hurtado 2008). During all phases, violence, and the fear instilled in
554 the minds of the Maya-Q'eqchi' that lived through the Guatemalan civil war,
555 suppressed the local indigenous people's arguments against oil palm and sugarcane
556 plantations. Social fear is a complex collective experience (Pain and Smith 2008) that
557 can be unleashed by isolated events, such as the Panzós Massacre of 1978 (CEH 1999),
558 and by everyday events, like the presence of private security forces, or symbols that
559 bring back **memories of the Guatemalan civil war**, such as military uniforms, a scorched
560 earth military strategy – burning of homes and crops – to ensure the permanent dispersal
561 of the population, or government announcements outlawing protests.

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

571 state accused such occupiers of exercising violence, invading private property and
572 fueling the conflict.

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

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

587 As the conflict developed, diverse national organizations and international human rights
588 NGOs built alliances, which led to the conflict being depicted as one about rights in the
589 *revealed phase*, and one about agrarian conflict in the *silencing phase*. These results
590 coincide with other studies illustrating that both the type of organizations and the
591 alliances between organizations involved in campaigns influence the visibility of a
592 conflict and the arguments of those involved (Brad 2015; Castellanos-Navarrete and
593 Jansen 2015; Pye 2010; Wolford 2004). Alliances between environmental and agrarian
594 organizations have contributed to depict some conflicts as agrarian or environmental
595 struggles on a national and transnational scale, for example through campaigns against

596 climate change, agrofuels, deforestation and land grabbing (Pye 2010; Brad 2015), and
597 the development or breakdown of alliances between NGOs and peasant organizations
598 and the local population have also sometimes contributed to mask existing conflicts
599 (Wolford 2004; Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen 2015).

600 In the Polochic, the evolution of the conflict forced peasant organizations and NGOs to
601 change their strategies, and to form new alliances with international NGOs. Similar to
602 other violent agrarian conflicts, the organizations opted to condemn the violation of
603 human rights at the international, rather than the national level (Künnemann and
604 Monsalve 2013, Marin-Burgos 2014). In Guatemala, where the economic power of
605 oligarchic families is historically linked to legislative and judicial power (Casaús-Arzú
606 2010), the human rights framework has not worked in favor of the demands of
607 Polochic's indigenous population, where the right to life, food and housing continues to
608 be denied (OACNUDH 2013). In this case, most of the organizations involved in
609 support of disposed families are not self-identified as a human right organization,
610 however they used the rights framework in different ways, such as claiming the rights to
611 land, to food or to housing for indigenous and peasant communities.

612 According to Monsalve (2013), the functionality of the international human rights
613 framework (UN 1948) depends on the particular context and the extent to which the
614 framework itself has been developed. The results of this research illustrate that a human
615 rights framework does not by itself allow for an effective denunciation of what Galtung
616 (1969) would call "structural violence" or what Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence".
617 The latter refers to the damage to marginalized populations that occurs continuously
618 through time and space, causing almost imperceptible socio-ecological changes (ibid.).
619 In this case, slow violence is the process of dispossessing the Maya-Q'eqchi' population
620 of their resources through contamination process and the persistent denial of historical

621 rights to land of indigenous communities. This process has provoked, malnutrition,
622 poverty, labor exploitation and the loss of biodiversity (Alonso-Fradejas 2012,
623 Mingorría et al 2014).

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

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

645 they have been conditioned by a context of shrinking international development
646 cooperation in the last ten years.

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

658 **Conclusions**

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

668 The analysis of the Polochic conflict has shown that the alliances between NGOs and
669 the rural population have weakened over time, with a decrease in the number of NGOs

670 present in the region. Tensions and disagreement due to divergent strategies and
671 ideologies have prevented the formation of a solid peasant movement (Bastos and
672 Camus 2003). Direct violence and the threat of violence are key factors behind this
673 weakening, associated with new dynamics in the expansion of flex-crops and the top-
674 down advocacy in the silenced phase of the conflict by a few international and national
675 NGOs. This has prevented local communities' strategies from taking center stage. As a
676 result of these dynamics, the Polochic conflict is publicly touted as one that is resolved
677 although a concealed, conflict remains.

678 The triangulated methods used in this article have enabled me to observe possible
679 contradictions between the results obtained from participant observation, semi-
680 structured interviews and content analysis (Nightingale 2015). For example, content
681 analysis showed the conflict to be resolved and successful in the *silencing phase*, but the
682 interviews illustrated that it was still there and even more complex than in previous
683 years. The results furthermore show the importance of a dynamic and multi-scale
684 perspective in the analysis of conflict, since the visibility and nature of a conflict
685 depends on the scale and moment of analysis and the stakeholders interviewed. Also,
686 the results suggest that no transversal social movement has yet been created in the
687 Polochic to effectively articulate environmental, social, cultural, economic and labor
688 demands against flex-crops, or to address the tension between the sometimes divergent
689 aims and strategies of NGOs, peasant organizations and the local indigenous population.
690 Future studies could conduct a historical analysis of the changes in the language used by
691 Guatemalan agrarian and environmental justice movements to denounce structural
692 violence that emerges in the expansion of flex-crops, and why such changes have
693 occurred, as explored more generally in Central America (see Coklin et al 1995).

694

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915 APPENDIX. - NGOs and peasant organizations classification by impact scale and focus
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NGOs and other organizations	Meaning of acronym and work areas related with the Polochic case	Interviewees	Operational scale of action	Focus on
ECAP	<p><i>Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción psicosocial (Community Study and Psychosocial Action Team)</i></p> <p>Provides psychosocial support to the victims of the Guatemalan Civil War</p>	Former specialist member of the organization	National	Development
UVOC	<p><i>Unión Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas (Verapaz Union of Peasant Organizations)</i></p> <p>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.</p>	One representative and one field specialist	National	Peasant
CUC	<p><i>Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Peasant Unity)</i></p> <p>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.</p>	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	<p><i>Coordinadora de ONGs y Cooperativas (NGO and cooperatives coordinator)</i></p> <p>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</p>	Two researchers	National	Research and Development
CONCAD	<p><i>Consejo Cristiano de Agencias de Desarrollo (Christian Council of Development Agencies)</i></p> <p>Affiliated to the CONGCOOP, in charge of fostering local power through participation on Community Development Boards in the municipalities of Panzós, Alta Verapaz</p>	One representative	Regional	Development
FGT	<p><i>Fundación Guillermo Toriello</i></p> <p>Fosters integrated rural development by supporting the legal security of the land, territorial planning and developing the community economy</p>	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	<i>Human Rights Commission</i> 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	Latent
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

	Silenced (1998-2011)		Revealed (2011-2012)	Silencing (2012-2014)	
Roles (organizations' acronyms)	Support (COCAD, UVOC, ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT) Research (CONGCOOP, Action Aid)	Support (UVOC) Facilitation (COCAD, ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, EIObservador, FGT, Action Aid) Negotiation (CUC, FGT, Action Aid)	Support (CONCAD, UVOC) Denunciation (ECAP, CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT, HRC, Right Action, Action Aid)	Support (CONCAD, UVOC) Protest (CUC, FGT) Negotiation (CUC, CONGCOOP, FGT) Mobilization of Resources (Intermon Oxfam)	Support (CONCAD, UVOC, FGT) Research (Action Aid) Negotiation (CUC) Mobilization of Resources (Intemon Oxfam) Counterpart (CUC)
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

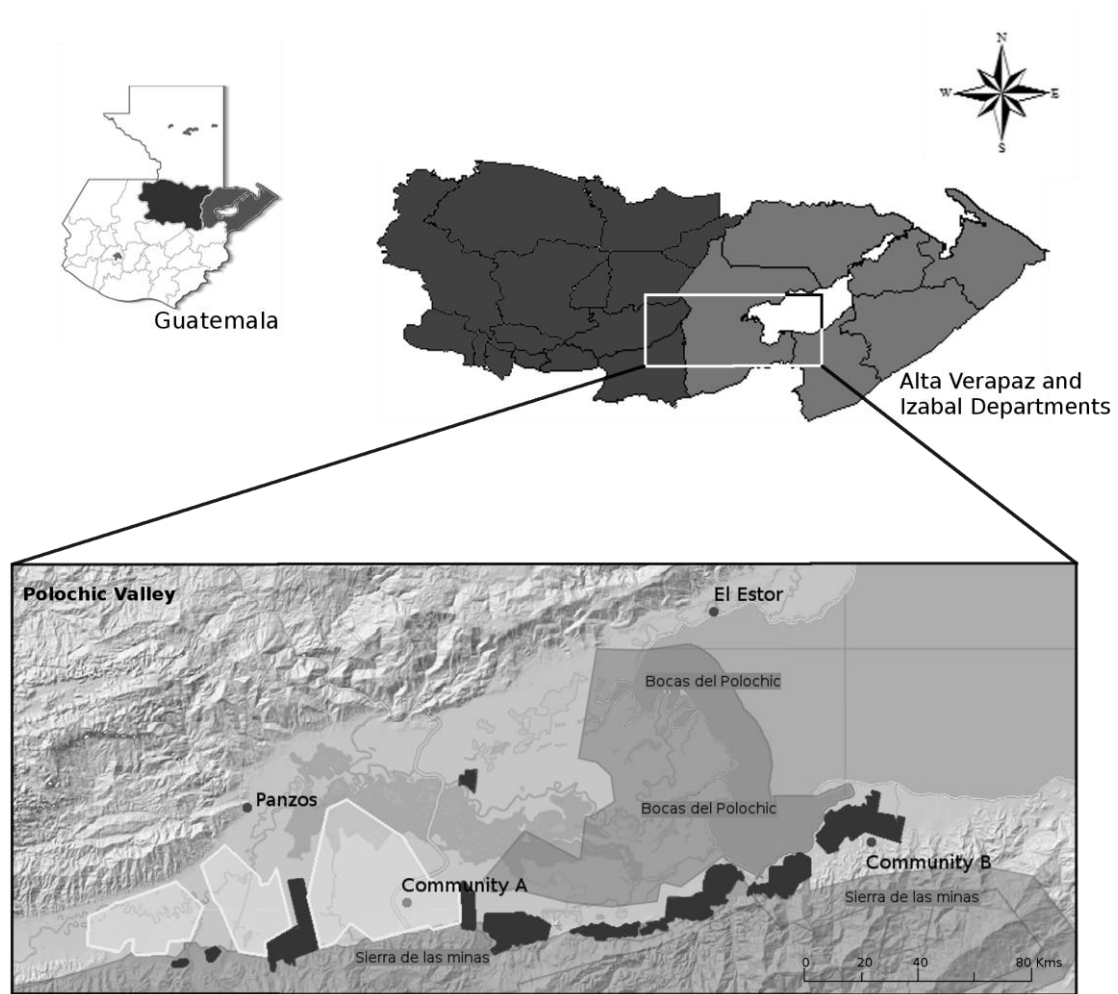


Figure 1. Case study area: The Polochic Valley.

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.

Obj: Understand the environmental and agrarian conflicts generated by the development of oil palm and sugar cane from a multi-scale and temporal perspective.

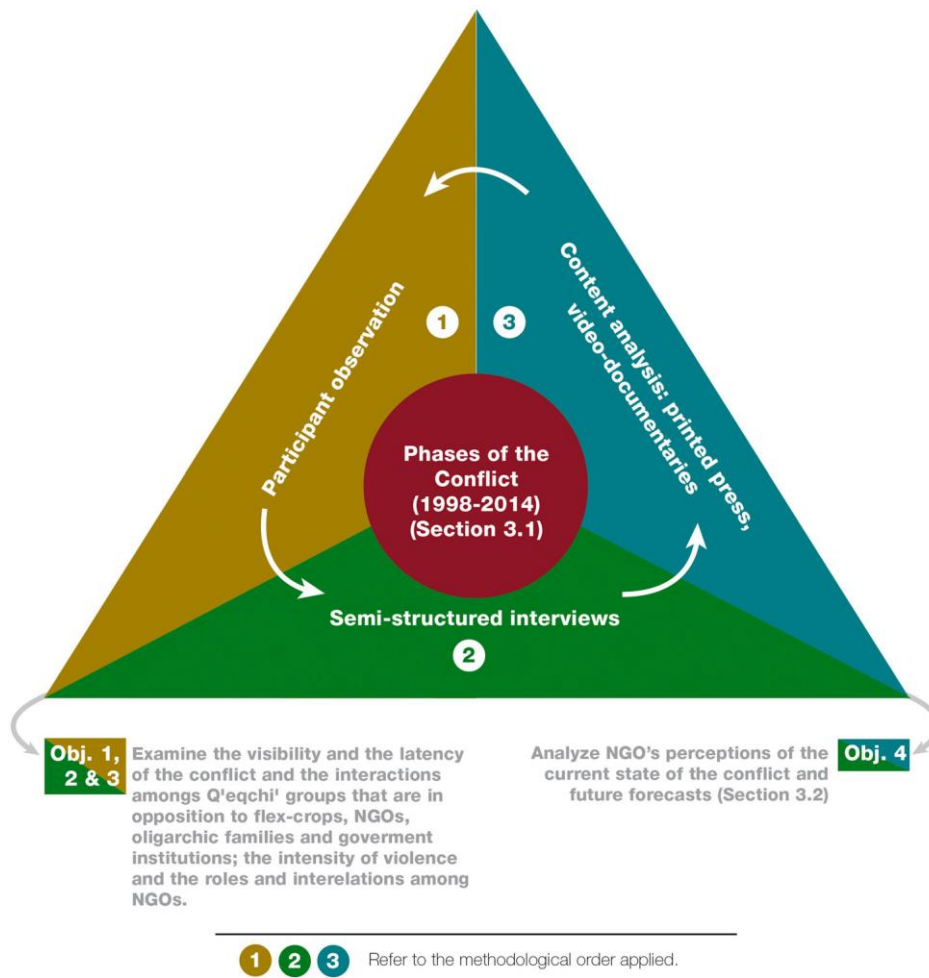


Figure 2. Methodological strategy and research objectives.

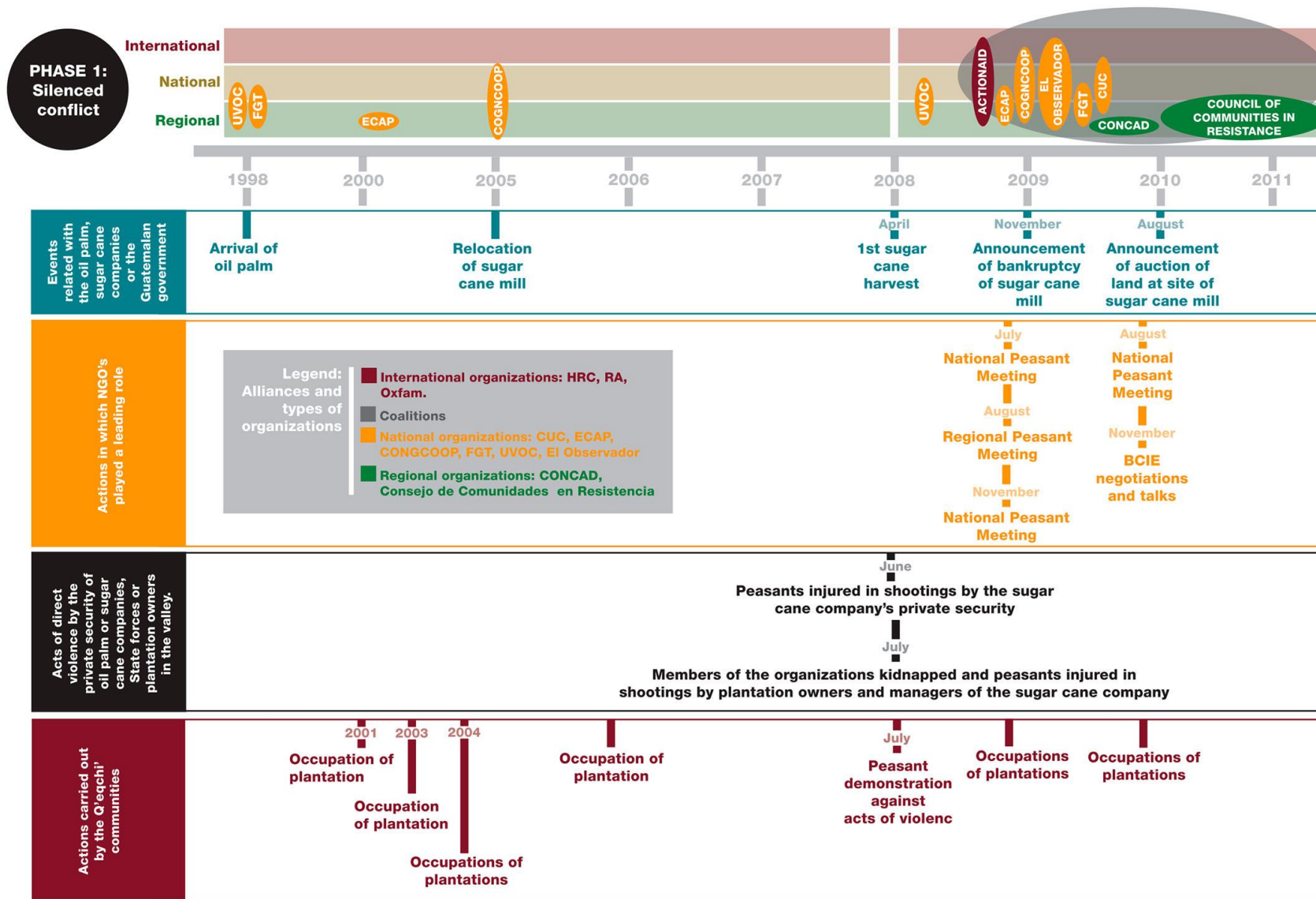


Figure 3. Conflict dynamics during the Silenced phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.

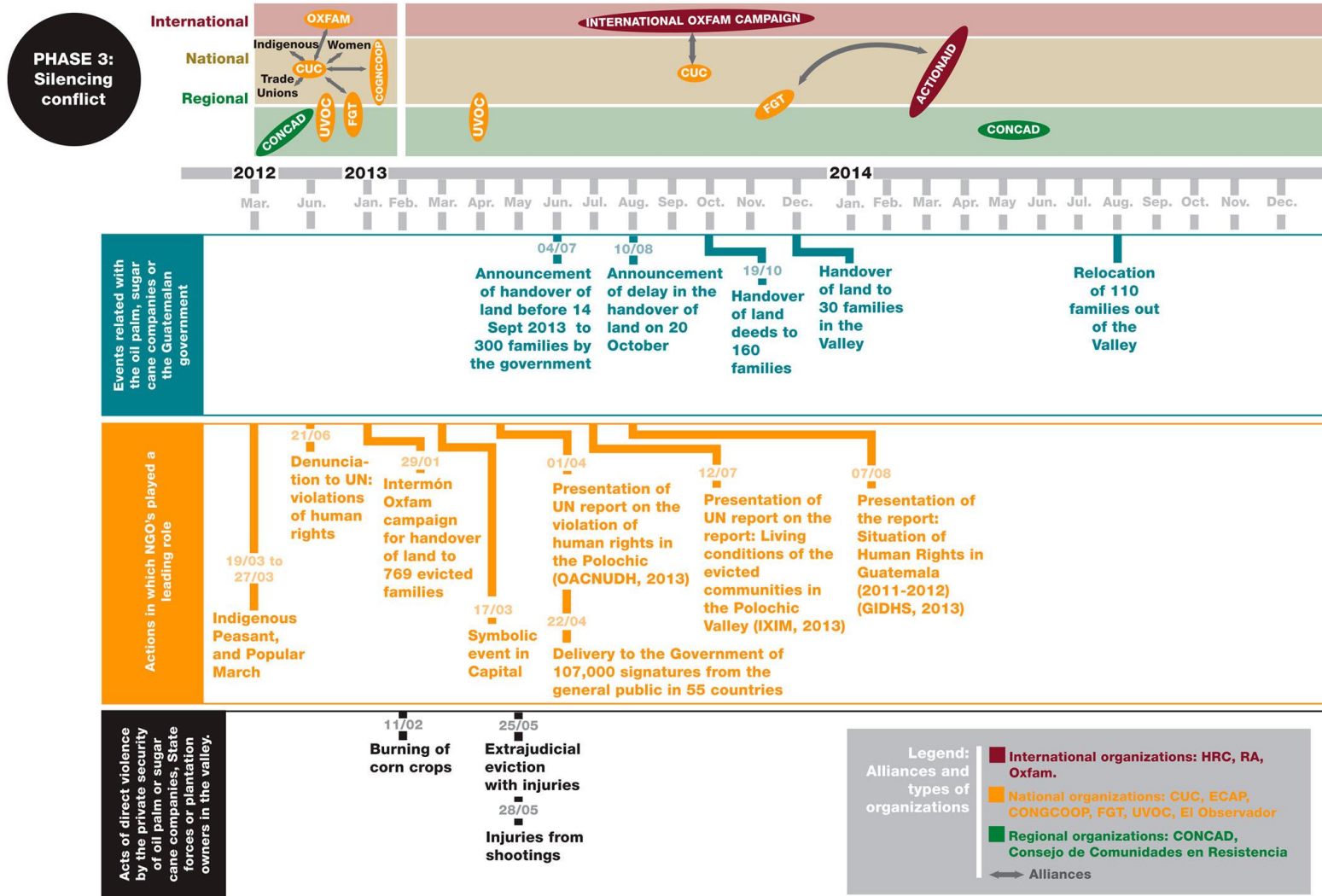


Figure 4. Conflict dynamics during the Revealed phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.

**PHASE 2:
Revealed
Conflict**

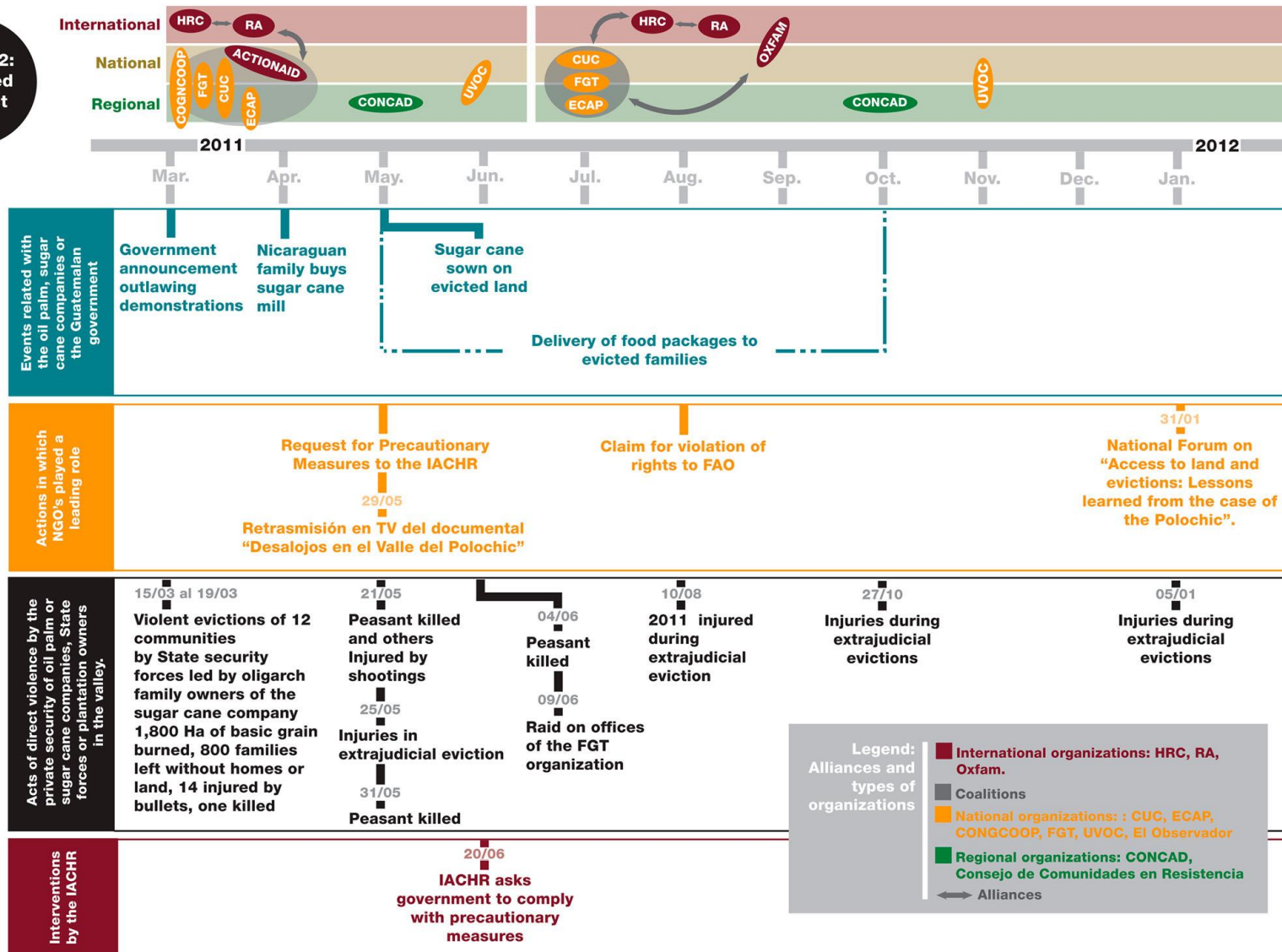


Figure 5. Conflict dynamics during the Silencing phase: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alliances and main events.