

In-depth case study

Campaigning against the Patuca Dam

This case study can be used with many of the exercises, particularly in SECTIONS A2, A3 and A5. Some questions for reflection are:

- What approaches to advocacy are used (**by, with** or **for** those affected by a situation)? Why do you think they are used? Do you agree with the approach?
- What faces of power are evident (open, closed, hidden)?
- What types of power do the different stakeholders have and what is their legitimacy based on?
- What could be done in the future to minimise risk?
- What would you do in MOPAWI's situation to ensure that the dam is not built in the future?

Land rights in Honduras

MOPAWI is a Tearfund partner based in La Mosquitia region of Honduras, Central America. In this region is a large area of pristine rain forest, much of which is protected. MOPAWI works for the sustainable development of the indigenous people in the region. When MOPAWI started work there they discovered that the indigenous people believed that the land they lived on was theirs, when in fact it was classed as national land. This meant that nobody had secure tenure and that anyone could 'peacefully' settle on the land and, after some years, claim it as their own. Therefore one of the first actions that MOPAWI was involved in was to create awareness of the issue of land tenure and help people to organise themselves at community level to be granted land rights. The indigenous population has been negotiating with the government for nearly ten years.



Rainforest in La Mosquitia region.

Photo: Mike Webb, Tearfund

Patuca Dam project

Honduras cannot supply enough electricity to serve the current needs of its population and, since the 1960s, the government has been collecting detailed data from the Patuca River (in La Mosquitia) to consider whether it would be a suitable source for hydroelectric power. There was already a dam in operation in a different part of the country but, during a very long dry season in 1994, it had to dramatically decrease its production of electricity and introduce rationing. Since then, Honduras has needed to buy electricity

from neighbouring countries and the government has been under pressure from these countries and from its own industry to develop its own secure source of electricity.

In 1996 the government contracted two North American companies to build a dam on the Patuca River, and granted them concessions to sell electricity back to them for the following 40 years. The government had, in effect, provided natural resource rights to foreign companies, while ten years of 'negotiations' with the indigenous population had produced no results.

The companies hired an agency from Costa Rica to undertake an environmental impact assessment to consider the likely effects of the proposed dam on the environment and the people there. This took six weeks to complete and there were fears that it was rushed through so that the dam could start as quickly as possible.

MOPAWI's concerns

MOPAWI was concerned that this dam would have devastating consequences on La Mosquitia:

- The dam would prevent the river from flooding, and so prevent the land becoming fertilised, resulting in reduced food production.
- The Patuca River is the main form of transportation in the region and the dam would lower the water levels and make it more difficult for boats to pass up and down the river.
- A new road was planned which would have opened it up for migration of people into the region, threatening the land rights of the indigenous population, putting pressure on an already fragile ecosystem and increasing logging.
- The electricity was for the main industrial cities and La Mosquitia would have been the last place in the country to receive a constant supply.

The Patuca River provides the main form of transportation for the region.

Photo: Mike Webb, Tearfund



Photo: Mike Webb, Tearfund

There was also evidence from a geologist that, with the high annual rainfall and a fragile ecosystem that is prone to erosion, the dam would be blocked after only a few years. The result would therefore have been environmental destruction with no ongoing supply of electricity to show for it.

Advocacy action **NETWORKING WITH ORGANISATIONS** The first step for MOPAWI was to form a coalition with other concerned groups, including environmental groups, indigenous people’s groups and local government representatives. Since the population had previously been mobilised over the issue of land rights, the people were organised and accustomed to representing themselves at every level.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY At the same time MOPAWI became involved in awareness-raising activities. These included seminars with people in La Mosquitia, a weekly programme on the national radio with a phone-in discussion, and a press conference with the Honduran media.

LOBBYING AT GOVERNMENT LEVEL MOPAWI also met with the government and the companies involved in building the dam to discuss the issues and to represent their concerns. This was done in private meetings as well as a public forum in the capital city to which the government, companies, indigenous groups, environmental groups and the media were invited.

LOBBYING THE FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS MOPAWI contacted the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank to alert them about the social and environmental effects of building the Patuca Dam, which they were financing.

WORKING AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL Early in 1997 MOPAWI contacted partner organisations in the UK, such as Tearfund, and in the US, such as the Native Lands Group and the International Rivers Network. MOPAWI asked them to put external pressure on the Honduran government and on the companies to halt the plans for the dam.

Objectives of the campaign

The coalition demanded the following action be taken:

- An environmental impact assessment of at least 18 months so that the likely effects on the environment and animals during all seasons could be understood.
- Serious investigation into alternative possibilities for providing power in the region.
- Granting the Patuca Region the status of a protected area.
- Granting communal land rights to the indigenous population.

What happened?

The proposed dam became a subject of national interest and the construction companies, concerned that it may not have been a good investment, were more eager to talk, even though they were still planning to go ahead with the construction.

The coalition did not merely complain about the proposed dam but they tried to find alternative solutions. They recognised the need for electricity and showed that a series of smaller dams could be built throughout the country to provide more electricity. They also

showed how through biomass, solar and wind energy, Honduras could produce enough electricity for the whole population.

The campaign did endanger those involved. Carlos Luna, the mayor of one of the municipalities in the Patuca Region, was murdered in his office. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the campaign to protect the Patuca National Park and it is thought his death is connected in some way to this.

In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch tore through Honduras, causing massive destruction to homes and the environment. For more than 150 kilometres along the Patuca River huge areas of the river bank and thousands of trees were completely washed away. An impact study showed that, even if the dam had withstood the force of the hurricane and resulting river flow, it would have received so much silt and debris that it would have been unusable.

The situation now In March 1999 the companies involved officially withdrew their involvement in the dam project. They said this was due to the level of local opposition. It must also partly be due to their realisation that the project was unworkable. However, the government still has plans to build the dam and is looking for other partners.

Apart from stopping the project for the moment, the campaign has enabled the people in La Mosquitia to be better organised, it has strengthened the environmental movement in Honduras as a whole and more people are supportive of protecting natural forests.

The future The coalition is ready to oppose future proposals to build the dam. MOPAWI is still working with the indigenous communities and the government for land rights to be granted to the indigenous communities. When this happens they will be in a much stronger position to prevent unwanted development and to control their own future. 'The indigenous groups in the region didn't really associate with the government before. Now they are talking to them at the highest level' (Osvaldo Munguia, Director, MOPAWI).