

"YOU FORGOT THIS IN CHALATENANGO"

An interview with Pedro Cabezas, Coordinator of International Allies against Metal Mining

On March 29, 2017, El Salvador celebrated the fact that it became the first country in the world to prohibit metal mining. This prohibition passed through El Salvador's Legislative Assembly with support from a sweeping coalition and is backed by almost 80% of the population. This law is aimed at protecting El Salvador's environment and natural resources. Despite the current overwhelming support, this anti-mining movement began with a few, yet driven grassroots groups, with their minds set to push back the country's historical alliance to pro-business policies. CRISPAZ sat down with Pedro Cabezas, coordinator of the International Allies against Metal Mining to learn more about this issue.

Pedro Cabezas has been working on the mining issue for the last seven years. He had lived in Canada for 20 years and traveled with a delegation to Chalatenango. He remembers, "One of the things we found when we were visiting was that communities in Chalatenango were concerned with the issue of mining. They pretty much gave me a mandate to go back to Canada and tell the mining companies that they were not wanted here in El Salvador. So when I went back to Canada, I organized a group called Canadians against Mining in El Salvador, and we began to work on that issue. In particular, we brought the message to Canadian NGOs and civil society organizations that Canadian companies were violating human rights here in El Salvador." "We believed that as Canadians we had the responsibility to denounce this and to make sure that companies were accountable to the desires of the communities down here. With that possibility, I developed a network, and in 2013, I was offered a job here in El Salvador coordinating international allies against mining in El Salvador. That was a one-year contract, but four years later I am still here."

Now, Pedro Cabezas is working with CRIPDES, which is a local community development organization that has a presence in 7 departments of El Salvador. For more than 10 years, the communities that CRIPDES works with have been organized against mining companies. They began to organize in Chalatenango back in 2006, and the following year they helped to form the National Roundtable against Metallic Mining in El



Salvador (known as the "Mesa"), which is a coalition of different organizations that have been advocating for the prohibition of mining in the country.

A couple of years ago, we were hearing about violence and threats against environmental activists. Has the situation on the ground improved?

We had that problem here back in 2007 – 2008. The Pacific Rim Company was trying to set up a mining project here in Cabañas, the El Dorado mining project. Because of community opposition, and the government announcing that they were not going to give any more permits, there was a bit of a conflict in the community. Four people died out of that conflict, including one pregnant woman. But this subsided in 2009-2010, and since then we haven't had that problem here in El Salvador. We know that violence has intensified in the rest of the Central American region. In Honduras, Guatemala and even Nicaragua, we have had a lot of reports of the increase of violence against environmental activists and land defenders.

In El Salvador, it has been kept under control, particularly because the government that has been supportive of the anti-mining movements. And as such there has been a lot of protection for anti-mining movements. The link between the violence elsewhere in Central America is that there are government forces encouraging non-government forces in the repression of anti-mining environmental activists. You have police forces protecting companies, or an orchestrated effort between private and public security forces to repress any formal protests. But this hasn't happened in El Salvador

because we have had a government who has been on the side of environmental activists since 2009.

Have the people responsible for these threats and acts of violence been caught?

Of the crimes in 2009? Yes. There were four or five people who were captured, and they were put in jail. There was a huge investigation by the police and the Attorney General's office. Environmentalists argue that the material actors of the crime were captured, but not the intellectual authors. The authorities attributed the deaths to gang violence and to local conflicts between families and the communities in Cabañas, but everybody who was involved knew that that was not true. It happened because there was a presence of the companies, who had, by 2007, intensified a campaign against environmentalists. At first, it was a legal campaign—they brought charges against a



"A water law as well as a food sovereignty law need to be passed in order to ensure food and water for everybody." Pedro Cabezas

number of people they alleged had destroyed property of the company. The VP of Pacific Rim, Rodrigo Chavez, was present at the lawsuit directing what the lawyers should be saying. [Note: Rodrigo Chávez Palacios is the son of a well-known politician who was once Minister of External Affairs of El Salvador. He was the Vice President of Pacific Rim at the time of the murders in Cabañas. Later on, he was implicated in the murder and dismembering of the body of a municipal employee. Only a year after being convicted to a ten-year prison sentence, he was granted a release by a judge pending review of his case.

So what people are saying is that Chávez is capable of being the mastermind behind the murders in Cabañas. Members of the community in Cabañas, particularly those close to the victims of these assassinations, brought forward a letter to the Attorney General saying that he should investigate. In addition to the murder that Chávez was caught doing, he should investigate him for the murders in Cabañas. He has a clear

precedent that he could investigate that kind of violence, but they never did anything.

The legal victory against Oceana Gold was encouraging. What do you think are the next challenges ahead?

It was very important to prevent mining from coming into the country because it is a highly polluting industry, only second to the nuclear industry according to the EPA in the USA. The impacts would have been disastrous for El Salvador. However, that was just an act of prevention of new problems. Now we need to take steps to mitigate a lot of environmental problems that we have right now. Organizations have put a lot of legislation forwards in order to mitigate some of the problems we have in the country.

We are the most polluted country in Central America, and we have the most inequitable access to water in the area. We are highly deforested, overpopulated, and are located in a zone that is environmentally vulnerable to extreme natural events like earthquakes and floods. So we really need to start looking at the country as one that is environmentally vulnerable and to pass legislation that will help us mitigate the problems.

A number of legal proposals have been put forward, for example the Water Law as well as food sovereignty laws, which need to be passed in order to ensure food and water for everybody. The constitution needs to be reformed in order recognize this too: water and food as basic human rights. This again is legislation that is still pending. We are also looking at disaster prevention, not only laws, but actions and policies that will help insure the viability of the country in the long term.

Archbishop Escobar published a powerful statement about the environment and Pope Francis did as well. Has the Roundtable experienced the support of the Church concretely?

I think this could not have been done without the support of the Church. Back in 2007, the Church began to make public statements about the importance of prohibiting mining in the country. There was a bill signed by the Salvadoran Bishops Conference (CEDES), and it was addressed to President Saca. They declared that the country was not viable for mining, and that the government should look into the possibility of prohibiting mining. They were supporting the issue on the side of the social movement. The Church has never directly worked with the National Round Table against Mining or with any other anti-mining organizations, but they have shared the same message. Obviously, the Pope's encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*, actually came to reinforce that message from the Church and also to reinforce a lot of the environmental arguments by civil-social organizations that are being made in order to protect the environment. That came to a

very powerful fruition in February, when the bishop himself went to the legislative assembly to present documents to prohibit mining. They first presented the legislation and then they called for a public march in order to come to the assembly and ask the legislators to pass the law, to discuss the law. This was very powerful too because they had collected 28,000 signatures from members of the Church from all over the country.

I think this was the tipping point for the legislators to say, “This is an issue, this is something we need to discuss.” Obviously, this was a very important public display of support from the bishop, but before that they had already been in talks with all of the political parties. They had already come to an agreement in the



legislative assembly’s environmental and climate change commission to discuss the issue. In the previous five years, they had been discussing the water law as their main concern. However, they reached a stalemate on the question of water management. Would it be publically or privately managed? A mixture of both? So, the next critical issue was mining that emerged around September or October of last year. The victory over Oceana Gold at the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes was very important because it motivated the commission to discuss the law. Another key element was the involvement of the bishop, presenting his own version of the prohibition of mining. This gave them the encouragement they needed to continue discussing the issue. It was a combination of all these forces coming together to make this happen.

How important is international solidarity for your cause? What kinds of forms could it take to help the situation in El Salvador and Central America?

International solidarity has played a very key component in a number of ways. Its power has been symbolic, political, financial, and it has supported those who believe that El Salvador is a country that is not

environmentally viable for mining. Solidarity has played a key component, and I think it has made this so different from other anti-mining movements in the region—the fact that we had a strong international anti-mining component. As I said earlier, I am the result of the international solidarity because I used to come to El Salvador with medical delegations from Canada.

For years, as a member of the Salvadoran-Canadian Association in Toronto, we used to do a lot of work supporting communities, particularly in Chalatenango, Arcatao, Nueva Trinidad, and all those areas. That is where we learned about mining. Not only myself, but many people that would come to visit our country. They would come and wanted to learn about the issues that were affecting El Salvador.

In Chalatenango, the people were very strong. They knew that if they did not stop mining, the country was going to be in a worse situation than the one it is in right now. So, for example, there is little point in bringing medical brigades if you have mining companies from Canada that are polluting the environment. This changed the minds of many people. People that I began to work with in Canada, they had all been to Chalatenango, and had all heard the same message. We were all Salvadoran-Canadian, and as a diasporic community, we can play a very strong role in international solidarity, because we can be the connection between our culture and the culture that we are accepting as our new home. We can translate a lot of the issues politically, socially and linguistically to the new community, and explain what the connections are.

This is very important. The civil and social organizations from the countries of these mining companies are also important. Because many times what happens is that people make judgments about an entire country based on the actions of the mining company. But as you know the truth is far from that—what the companies do can be quite different from what the people in Canada and the US want to see happen.

It is important to maintain connections with civil society groups, communities, sister cities, and organizations such as CRISPAZ. Their work is very important because it helps spread the message as well as generate political support. We have had meetings with politicians in Canada and in the U.S. We have been present at the annual general meetings of some corporations, denouncing what these corporations are doing here in El Salvador. We have led tours and campaigns against mining to educate the public opinion. All of that work could not have been possible without the support of international solidarity.

In 2013, for example, when Pacific Rim, which was a Canadian company, was taken over by Oceana Gold, an Australian Company, an Australian union began picketing on the last Friday of each month at the doors of Oceana Gold, without exception. They were annoying the

company, but that is nothing in comparison to what the company does when they come here. They not only annoy the community, they are actually repressing our communities. Yet, just having those people picketing was very powerful for us. It was a psychological factor to get the company to start thinking of El Salvador in a different way. We're not a country that can simply be exploited. We have communities that need to be dealt with, that are actually resisting, and they have allies. That's an example of why it is important to have international solidarity.

The other part that international solidarity plays is in technical support. We don't have the knowhow and the academic capacity to analyze the issue from a technical perspective. The first studies that were made about the impact of the El Dorado mining project were done by the company itself. However, a critique of this study was then done by a professor from a different university, and this critique gave us a different perspective so we could start questioning the company.

There have been other universities that played a very important role, like the University of Ohio, where Dina Larios, a Salvadoran volcanologist, has begun to write and research about the issue of mining in El Salvador. We have Dickens University in Australia that has started to research Oceana Gold and the work it has done in different parts of the world. We have Aarhus University in Denmark that also began to look at the issue of commerce groups associated with mining. So all these academics began to give us a lot of knowledge that we did not have before. One thing is to say, "We don't want mining," another is to say, "We don't want mining for the following reasons..." That role of providing reasons was an important contribution from the international solidarity community.

This movement started in small rural communities in Chalatenango. What can we learn from these communities and the way they organized?

The movement started in Chalatenango and Cabañas, and they played a very important role. It began with communities that were already organized. These are communities that for years, since the war, have been organizing to defend their human rights: the right to live in their lands, the right to live in a clean environment, to defend their access to land and financial resources. These communities were smart enough to start building alliances. They knew that they were not going to be able to fight the companies on their own, so they built alliances with international partners. There is funny anecdote regarding this when Au Martinique Silver, a company that was based in Canada, began exploring Chalatenango without community consent. The company had already set up a number of test sites on land that did not belong to them. The community organized, and they were able to keep the company workers from coming in. They warned

the company that if they continued to come without their consent, they were going to have issues. They also went to the sites where the company had taken soil samples and retrieved all the chips that had been placed in order to send GPS signals to map out the sites. They put the chips inside an envelope and gave them to one of the international solidarity workers that was traveling back to Canada to be sent back to the company. Inside the envelope there was a note that read: You forgot this in Chalatenango.

This is how organized and sophisticated they are: knowing where the company is coming from, making the contacts and connections with the people from those countries, and building that sense of solidarity with them. Their capacity to organize and the political capacity to envision their own future is important. Their capacity to negotiate alliances is very important too. Again, the National Roundtable came together because these communities realized that this is a national issue. They knew that they needed to form a national organization that would support their struggle at the local level, and that's how it came together. Also, this realization spurred the coalition of international allies against mining. So you have alliances at the local level, at the national level, and at the international level as well; a very sophisticated movement. And in this movement you have all sorts of specializations: academics, activists, organizers, and people in the rural areas, people at the national level, students and a lot of religious organizations.

The fact that they had a religious component made it possible to bring in other actors as well. I highlight the movement of organization because the inspiration of the National Roundtable came from organized communities. Sadly, there are communities that are not organized that have felt the impact of mining. Take the San Sebastian community, for instance. A community that has been a mining community for a long time, they are not organized. They don't have a community structure for decision-making processes. They are reliant on politicians and the mayors, and those actors don't always make the best decisions for the community. So they have felt the most impact from mining companies. The river is contaminated with acid rain, and the community has no employment. They have to do artisanal mining, for lack of a better option, and they are living without running water. They pay over 30% of their family income for water each month, whereas a typical family in San Salvador pays less than 2%. These communities that are not organized are the ones that are suffering the most. Organized communities are the ones that have led the battle against mining, with, of course, the support of all these sectors.

The struggle has taken a long time, since 2005-2006, and for a long time it was very difficult to maintain. But as you can see, there's a lot to be learned from these communities.