

FINAL REPORT

Project Title: *Flashpoint: Kekchi Territory* Documentary Series and Conflict Resolution Campaign

Location: Kekchi Mayan communities in the highland jungles of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala

Sponsoring Institution: International House – NYC

Designated Project Leader: Richard Brown (United States/Columbia Journalism School)

Section I: Narrative

This project is collaboratively producing a documentary series with Kekchi Mayan communities in Guatemala who are resisting land and water grabs by local powerbrokers and international companies. This project is also connecting these frontline communities, who are under increasing threat of violence and arrest, to potential grassroots allies in the U.S., Canada, and Spain, because agricultural commodity importers and dam builders from those countries are funding and profiting from land and water grabs in Kekchi territory.

Other fundraising efforts are contributing to this project. First, as a Columbia Journalism School Gray Fellow for International Reporting, I have a \$5,000 language grant to study Kekchi Mayan in northern Guatemala. This covered my airfare and is covering my food and lodging costs in Kekchi territory, the site of the documentary. I also received support to undertake text and video reporting related to this project as a Li Center-Pulitzer Center Fellow (\$4,250) and through the Foundation for Environmental Journalism (FEJ) of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) (\$4,782.33).

The idea for this project grew out of my Columbia Journalism School master's thesis, which in turn was informed by my 5 years as a reporter based in Guatemala. I was interviewing Kekchi community leaders attempting to resist land and water grabs as well as international relations and human rights experts. They all agreed that peaceful Indigenous activism in Guatemala is being met with intensifying criminalization and violence. Kekchi community leaders are struggling to gain international attention as they face a tide of assassinations and incarceration at the hands of Guatemalan authorities and paramilitary groups. The goal of this documentary series to protect and support frontline Kekchi communities by raising their profile and helping them build international alliances.

The central issue the project seeks to address—intensifying land and water conflict in Kekchi territory—exists due to extreme inequalities in access to land and water that date back centuries to Spanish colonization. As a consequence of this structural inequality, Kekchi territory has the highest incidence of childhood malnutrition in Guatemala, which in turn had the 5th highest rate of childhood malnutrition in the world, even before the economic carnage of the pandemic. Today, these inequalities in access to land and water are being exacerbated by climate change, which is supercharging droughts and storms, and by increasingly blatant corruption in government, which is facilitating harassment, violence, and evictions targeting Kekchi communities.

I chose the host site for the project—the area around the small city of Cobán—because this area is home to several land and water conflict flashpoints where hundreds of Kekchi community leaders have had spurious criminal charges pressed against them and over a dozen have been killed since 2017. I also chose this area because I have professional relationships of trust with local Kekchi community leaders who are facing criminal charges and other threats. Without these trusting relationships, it would have been impossible to gain access to the communities and people with the most compelling stories.

This work has been challenging. Prior to this project, my last contact with several key sources was 2018, and so I spent the first weeks of this project re-establishing contact and rapport with these sources. This took time, and was key to developing a collaborative storytelling process. This emphasis on collaboration over speed is necessary to avoid misinterpreting or mischaracterizing Kekchi stories and perspectives, and to respond responsibly to events on the ground. To communicate effectively with communities and community leaders under stress, we prioritized patience and collaboration, respecting their wishes at all

times. The advice I most wish to impart to future PfP project grantees is that a commitment to collaboration over speed yields better and more impactful work.

Due to evolving conditions on the ground, especially the spread of the Delta variant, our community partners asked us to request permission from our campus contact (International House - NYC) to delay the beginning of our project until August. I had hoped to avoid such delays, but I knew the right thing was to defer to our community partners. We were granted that permission, and so the project is still underway.

Despite the delays, we already have hours of interviews with numerous relatives of community leaders who have been incarcerated or killed. These interviews help me to define peace in the context of this project: The opposite of the anguish on the face of Manuela Chen, pictured in one of our photos, whose son was incarcerated for trying to hold onto his family's land. The opposite of the uncertainty and precarity in the faces of the children in another photo who stand in front of an altar to their father, who was killed for trying to hold onto his family's land. This project defines peace as what Kekchi families are peacefully fighting for: Security on their own deeded land, the opportunity to practice their own culture and worldview without discrimination, and the ability to provide a decent diet and education to their kids.

One of the central protagonists of the documentary series, Chico Tec Caal, featured in several of the accompanying photographs, helped to organize a regional vote in 2017 on whether to allow large hydroelectric dams to move forward in Kekchi territory. The vote overwhelmingly rejected the projects over concerns about access to the waters of the Cahabón River. And yet, construction (as pictured in attached photos) moved forward and key vote organizers were arrested. Chico maintains a community radio station (also pictured) and continues to support communities in land and water disputes with large landowners. Sadly, in August, his brother, Alberto Tec Caal, was murdered, apparently over a land conflict with a powerful plantation owner. Alberto is pictured next to Chico in the attached photo of the Tec Caal family.

This project is contributing to peace by bringing attention to the activism of Kekchi communities to achieve self-determination, security, and justice, and by helping these communities build international alliances that will strengthen their negotiating position with government authorities and international companies.

To advance these goals, I have established contact with frontline filmmakers and Indigenous and allied organizations in the U.S., Canada, and Spain that are involved in similar land and water conflicts. They have expressed interest in building relationships with Kekchi community leaders and we are helping them to do so. As we continue to produce this documentary series, we will pitch a pilot to major streaming services like Netflix through my contacts at Columbia Journalism School and the Pulitzer Center. We will also organize screenings with Guatemalan media outlets like *Plaza Pública*, private U.S. educational organizations like Where There Be Dragons, and allied grassroots groups like the Sunrise Movement in the U.S. and PorCausa in Spain. These and other organizations have already expressed interest in publishing or circulating our series.

We hope that this documentary series a) generates pressure on Guatemalan authorities to solve the murders of Kekchi community leaders and bring the perpetrators to justice; b) consolidates a network of organizational alliances that will monitor conflicts in Kekchi territory; and c) generates grassroots pressure on the U.S., Canadian, and Spanish agricultural commodity importers and dam builders that are funding or profiting from land and water grabs in Kekchi territory, so that they divest from harmful business operations.

I have learned a great deal through this project. Most of all, it has reinforced one of the most powerful lessons I have been taught by Mayan partners in Guatemala: that patience and historical perspective are central to Mayan struggles for justice. Often, when I ask Mayan community leaders why they are willing to run the risks they do, they tell me they're simply taking one more step forward in a 500-year conflict that their grandparents and great-grandparents and ancestors have endured for centuries. They say, if our ancestors didn't stop in the face of the Spanish colonization of the 1600s and 1700s, the dictatorships of the 1800s and 1900s, or the genocide of the 1980s, then we won't stop in the face of today's challenges.

Without this perspective, the idea that justice won't come overnight is disheartening. But with this perspective, Mayan communities draw strength from the memory of all the generations of people who have struggled for justice even when it seemed so much more distant. And they draw strength from the knowledge that they might be closer than ever. Our project also communicates this message, which, we hope, other movements can draw strength from, too.

Personal statement from grantee Richard Brown:

In Guatemala, Kekchi Mayan communities trying to hold onto their land face intensifying criminalization and violence, but they draw strength from a legacy of 500 years of resistance. Our documentary project shows that they have much to teach anyone willing to stand with them.

Grantee: Richard Brown // contactmrbrown@gmail.com
Documentary production partner: Juan Salvador Galich
Photographer: Patricia Macias

Finally, I would like to thank Projects for Peace, International House – NYC, and our campus contact Ciasia Brown on behalf of the documentary team and especially on behalf of our Kekchi Mayan partners, who express their gratitude for your solidarity.

Section II: Photos (by PorCausa photographer Patricia Macias)



The Tec Caal family. Alberto Tec Caal (center, white t-shirt) was killed on August 22.



Manuela Chen, mother of an imprisoned Kekchi community leader.



Children stand in front of a memorial photo of their father, a Kekchi Mayan community leader killed in 2018.