



4. AGUA BLANCA COMMUNITY

San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz



After this research was conducted mining companies have demonstrated an interest in the area and are attempting to resettle the community to nonproductive lands. (05)

Basic Community Data

Sixty four families live in the Agua Blanca community. The families live a peaceful life but there is a lot of poverty. The community's name comes from the Agua Blanca creek, which runs through it. People speak two languages: Spanish and Pokom. They practice Catholicism.

The community is divided up in four sectors:

- In the Ojo de Agua sector and in the De la Cruz live families that speak Pokom. These sectors are located in the upper zone in the hills, in the most accessible part of the community. There is a Catholic Church and water well.

- The families that speak Spanish live upstream and downstream from Agua Blanca. The Catholic Church, the communal house, the soccer field and a small health post are located downstream. The school and INDE's camp is located upstream.

Most of the community members of Agua Blanca have been born in the community land. The grandparents of the people living there were also born in Agua Blanca. We don't know who the first families that lived in this finca were and we also don't know when they came. But we have always known that it has been a finca and the families that live there have always worked for a patrón. The community wishes for a better future.



*Sixty four families live in the finca Agua Blanca.
The lives of these families are peaceful, but there is poverty (101).*

The land situation is critical. Since July 12 land was measured in 21 jobs (tarefas). A piece of land is to be given to the families. The problem is that the land to be given is a rocky. Those are not productive lands.

In addition, there is no fire wood, nor wood to build homes, or flat lands where to build the houses. At the beginning, the owners of the finca Agua Blanca gave a deadline of one year for the families to occupy the new lands. The biggest need the community has is land. Community residents want INDE to fulfill their promises.



*To abandon the valley and to live up in the hills presents a critical situation for the families.
If life is hard now, it would be worse then (06)*



Damages Caused by the Dam and INDE Promises

People are afraid of the place where the dam is located. People think that if one day the dam deteriorates, it could overflow and break. People want to go away from Agua Blanca because they do not feel safe.

There is no warning of when the gates are to be opened and the water overflows, this is a major problem we suffer. The people downstream who are washing clothes or bathing are in danger because the current is very strong. A person that was fishing (D. Juan Guanín Ventura) died because of this problem. In another occasion the current almost took away a truck and the person that was sleeping in it had to climb to the roof of the truck. Fortunately, D. Noe de la Cruz pulled him with a rope and saved his life. Another truck was washed down and a pick-up disappeared.



The river lacks water and it is contaminated. The waters are stagnant (47)



When the water from the reservoir overflows, the people downstream washing clothes or bathing are endangered. The problem is that there is no warning (110)

The community has also been affected by the lack of water in the river. The water is stagnant and there is lots of contamination. All this has brought about illnesses in the community (malaria).

Before the construction of the dam there was a beautiful river. It was full of fish, trees, flowers and birds of all colors and calls. Because the river was so big we crossed it in wooden balsas. The balsas were pushed with a stick, or pulled with a cable across the river. The cable was tied up to both banks. It was dangerous to cross the river. Today we don't see any of this. People are sad because they can't enjoy the river anymore. They never imagine that a river could be terminated.

Before the dam construction people from the community would fish many types of fish: *machaca, quixque, tepemichin, mojarra, peje, gúilín*. Now you can't fish because the river has dried up. There are no fish now. If you find a fish, it is contaminated and full of worms.



The adduction tunnel which carries water for energy generation runs from Pueblo Viejo to Quixal on top and buried under community lands. Short after the construction of the dam the land was suddenly flooded and we felt tremors. The water escaped from the tunnel and was running underneath community lands opening up wholes on the soil. When INDE fixed the water leaks we no longer felt tremors.

The community is scared that new leaks develop, that crevasses developed or that the soil washes down. Even though the company took care of the leaks, it is not clear that they did a good job. Some studies were conducted due to this problem, but the community never learned about its findings. INDE promised to pay for the damages caused by the flooding of the crops. They were even counting and doing studies about the crops destroyed. They failed to comply. They promised to take people to the Chapenal finca, but the land was bad there and people didn't want to leave.



Since the dam was built families can not fish and are saddened. The fish have worms. (140)



This place is called Chupadero. This whole was made by water leaks from the tunnel from the dam. People are afraid to live in Agua Blanca (41)

In order to protect the adduction tunnel, INDE has a camp at the entrance to the community. The construction of that camp damaged many crops that people had in that place: watercress and bananas. There used to be “jute” (an animal) around. Now there is cement and metal. We were never compensated for these damages.

Furthermore, to transport the community production and sell it, we have to walk between 1 and 2 km to the entrance to the finca. The communities to the other side of the river, in the department of Quiché, had access through that side, but INDE closed that way down. Now the people of those communities have to walk (many times with heavy loads).

INDE's camp at the entrance of the community does not allow people to leave a sack to be pick up at that place (this is as far as cars get here). This prohibition causes a lot of problems because some times we have to carry several sacks but there is no place to leave them.



INDE's camp helps the community out when there is an emergency. They allow telephone use. Sometimes they let some cars go in, so people avoid the long walk. The problem is that they don't always allow it.

INDE's camp does not allow, for example, that a street in the community gets fixed, or that we exploit the gypsum mine. INDE does not allow it in case that the pipes or the adduction tunnel gets damaged. For 3 months we worked in the mine, but INDE then prohibited it.

The construction of the tunnel brought no benefits to the community. Only 15 people of Agua Blanca got jobs. Many people came from other places to work for Spanish, Portuguese companies and others. They would ask if people knew how to do the job, and since the people from the community do not have any training, they would not give them jobs.

Before the construction of the dam the land was more productive. And rain was not so scarce.



To protect the tunnel of adduction INDE invaded fertile lands and closed access to the communities of the area (11)



Before the construction the dam construction the land was more productive. And rain was not so scarce. D. Julio Ibáñez's milpa (23)

Community Resources

The families from the community have been able to get water pipelines. The problem is that many times the water sources are dry and the vital liquid does not reach the houses.

Even though we lack water, land and money for production, the community cultivates corn, beans, and manioc. With this, the families have been able to survive. Nevertheless, there is always a need to use fertilizers and herbicides.

We take care of pigs, turkeys, chickens, dogs, cats and ducks. A few families have horses and only 4 families have one or two cows. The animals help to provide food and supplement the economy of the families.



There are randomly located fruit trees in the community. They are scarce but accessible to all families. There are also cedars, oaks and pines; and we plant *ruda* or *llanten* as medicines. But this doesn't solve our problems because we don't own the land. You can only improve the land when you own it.



The water pipe is not very wide. The water sources are dry. (141)



The best lands are occupied by the patrón to plant his milpa. (18)

In the community there are two mills what charge Q. 0.75 per arroba of corn. There are also 4 stores that help those families a bit.

Community people travel on Sundays to the market to sell their products. It is also good for buying basic supplies if you have money to buy with. The problem is that there is not always money.

The community received support from a few agencies:

- The municipality built the school with the support of another agency and with the effort of the families. They also built a small bridge across the Agua Blanca creek and gave the roof sheets to build the latrines.
- The government provided compost, but not all the families were able to buy it because of lack of resources, or because they did not want to.
- The church was built with the support of the parish of San Cristóbal and D. Víctor Contreras, who is in charge of it.



The church was built with the support of the parish of San Cristóbal. (28)



The municipality has given support for the school, a bridge and roof sheets to build the latrines. In the photo Víctor Aroldo and Sergio Obdulio Picón (83)

There are people in Agua Blanca with good experiences and knowledge:

- There are people who know the history of the community and the country. Other people know how to tell stories. Others know the birds of the community, trees and plants that there exist.
- Some community people can build nurseries. Others know how to cultivate rosa de Jamaica, corn, beans, peanuts, manioc or fruit trees like mandarins, mangoes, oranges, limes or zapotes.
- The men learned to fish in different ways (with a hook, a fish, net, a line with hooks thrown from bank to bank), or with a basket. You can also make fish nets, nets and metates with the string from the maguey. You can make break, achiote, brown sugar cane blocks, brooms and petates. Other people can hunt wild animals like deer, racoons, wild pigs or tacuazines.
- Women have several skills. They can make cigars, comales and soap made from pigs. Some women know how to embroider and they make napkins, covers, bags and rugs.
- Men and women know the plants and can make house remedies against coughing, for eye infections, indigestion, and flu or to lower fevers. Amongst other the following plants are used: lime tea, mejorana, ocote, ruda, flor de muerto, verbena, anona and many more.
- D. Oscar de la Cruz has knowledge of diseases and how to cure them. He is a health promoter from SIAS, and when the doctor is not there he sees the patients. Señora María Hernández is a midwife and has her paraphernalia to work with. She has received training and has an ID.
- The community can build houses of adobe, bahareque or palo pico with wood.
- Martín Hermógenes Hernández plays marimba and he also knows how to play the guitar and bass. He taught his children to play instruments and now has a group that provides joy to the community. Also D. Higinio Hernández knows how to play guitar and sings.
- We have experiences in organizing. With the support of the community Don Juan Hernández was able to obtain imdemnization for some patrulleros (paramilitaries). They fought for one year and a half. The success the community has obtained has been through the organization that we have.



D. Reginaldo Reyes shows us his nursery and a mandarin tree from where he derives an income.



D. Guillermo makes fishing nets and sells them. (65)



Rosa Lidia López shows us a rug and a napkin. The women work hard in the community. (68)



D. Juan Hernández is the president from the Community Council for Development. The successes the community has obtained have been through the organization we have. (78)



Roberto Márquez knows how to prepare achiote. You drink the juice from the seed for infection of the stomach. (71)



D. Oscar de la Cruz is a health promoter from SIAS and sees patients. (88)

Life, Knowledge and Experiences of the Community

The community of Agua Blanca works hard for a better life. Even though there is a lot of poverty, we have been able to survive. Some examples:

- The families themselves build their own houses. The problem is that some of the houses are in bad shape due to lack of economic resources and construction materials.
- When the latrines are full, the families take down the roof sheets and build new ones.
- The families fixed up the soccer field themselves. The former finca administration gave the land.
- The youth buy their own balls, uniforms (Q450.00) and shoes (Q 70.00) to play soccer. They like it because they keep in shape physically and mentally. They make friends with players from other communities.
- To protect the corn from weevil we build granaries and surrounded with lime.



Dña. Nieves de la Cruz house. Most houses are in bad shape due to lack of economic resources and construction materials. (02)



D. Víctor Rufino shows us his granary. It is empty because the rainy season has not been good (66).

The women from the community work hard: they make petates (they work 4 days and sell them for Q 5.00) and brooms (they work for 10 minutes and sell them for Q1.00). They use palmito to do this work.

Women also do a lot of domestic work. Such as Dña. Inés de la Cruz, who cleans everything up to make her home look pretty. Or Dña. Gudelia Picón, who has a sawing machine and works sewing. She knows how to make dresses, blouses, skirts, jackets and suits.

There is a health promoter and a midwife in the community. In general there are no problems with childbirths, even though recently one was born with a very big head. Many people from the community have good knowledge of medicinal plants.



Marta Picón Suárez makes a petate. It is sold at Q 5.00 per unit. (69)



Maria Picón Hernández is a known midwife. In the photo Marta with Carmen Liliana de la Cruz. (79)

The community has a sixth grade school. There are 45 children and two teachers who travel everyday from Santa Cruz. The teachers are responsible and there are no complaints about their performance. We have also been able to get some help for the children of the school: books, food, desks...



In Agua Blanca we practice the catholic religion. When we place a request for a priest Father German Sierra and Father Ennio Bosú come. We celebrate Easter and Christmas. On Christmas Eve we have posadas and the nativity scene. On Easter there are processions. On planting (May) and harvest (October) season the families usually kill a chicken and distribute it among the people that help out with the work.

There are four organized groups in the community:

- The exPAC, which work towards getting recognition from the State about their work as Civil Defense Paramilitaries during the time of the violence. Even though during the arm conflict there were no problems, most of the families participated in the PAC.
- The Pro-Tierra group, which negotiated with FONTIERRA for the possibility to buy the Agua Blanca finca.
- The group “dam,” whose main struggle is to get new and better lands in other places as reparations for the consequences of the construction of the Chixoy dam.
- The pastoral groups are very active. The catechist gets together all Fridays to prepare the teachings. They visit the ill and on Sundays they celebrate the word. 40 to 50 people participate.



Victor Aroldo Hernández shows us the church of Agua Blanca. In the community we practice the Catholic religion. (135)



The teachers of the community are Edwin Lisandro Ical and Samuel Isaías Ramírez. They teach some 45 children and are very responsible. (62)

In Agua Blanca we celebrate Easter, All Saints Day and Christmas. We make good foods and visit altars and cemeteries. There are also celebrations when we plant corn. The families want to be happy and kind. They like their own customs and respect among people and nature.

The community's day is March 9 in honor to the black Christ of Esquipulas.

In the community there is a musical group that plays marimba for birthdays, weddings and other celebrations. The marimba is called Flor de Verapaz and besides the marimba they play bass and guitar.



Some families have flowers planted in their houses, so it looks pretty. Such as the Lesly Amarilis Picón's family who have planted pascuals, cruz, carnations, verdolaga, geranium, pony and other. She takes care of them and waters them often when it hasn't rained.

When young people fall in love, the boyfriend has to request permission to the house of the girl. If he is accepted, the boyfriend's family has to make two requests bringing presents. The time space between these two requests can be between one or two years. In that way the couple gets to know each well and see if it is convenient or not. The day of the wedding is a happy moment, and they share gifts and good food.



Don Hermógenes Hernández shows us his bass and marimba "Flor de Verapaz." The community has a group to cheer up the celebrations.



D. Emiliano Picón family. Some families have flowers plants in their houses. They need to be taken care of so that they won't die. (37)

Problems and Needs of the Community

It is true that the community has been able to gain some success with lots of work and effort. But in general, the families are not at ease or conformed to life conditions. There are a lot of problems and needs which affect the community. Some of these needs can be taken care of with the same effort and work from the families. But most of them can only be resolved with the support of the State, INDE and the World Bank, and with the participation of other organizations and agencies.

The problems and needs that affect us most are:

The most urgent problem in the community is the lack of land to plant and work on. Because we don't own the land there is a lot of poverty in the community of Agua Blanca. And now, they want to displace the families and send them to infertile lands.

To plant any crop or to make a milpa, each of the families of the community has to request it in writing to the patrón. Also we have to ask permission individually, each time we need to gather wood. The community has to ask permission from the patron, even to have a visitor or a representative from an agency.



Economic alternatives for life: there is a great need to get ahead. The economic problem is very deep. We need land and also investment of resources in the production, commercialization and transportation.

The basic services: the life situation of the families of Agua Blanca is very hard. There are severe water, housing and electricity problems. There are no adequate roads or a health post with minimum requirements. There is a need to better education and health in the community.



D. Roberto Morán shows his bean plants. Crops are lost due to lack of water. The biggest problem in the community is that the families are being expelled from the land (60)



To gather wood we need to individually request permission each time from the patrón. In the photo César Augusto de la Cruz (67)

Resource Needs

The community does not have good access to water. It is not distributed well among all families. When there is no water, the Agua Blanca families use 3 wells and 1 creek, but the water is polluted and causes diseases.

The rivers are polluted. People cannot do anything to unpollute it. We need to live somewhere else. People want to live taking care of the environment.

The members of the community have never able to get credit or external support of financing for production. It is very hard to produce in bad lands. The soils are sandy and rocky.

We need to compost to get a minimum harvest. For a quintal of corn we get Q 50.00 and for a quintal of beans Q 150.00. We need financing for working the land.



There is no reforestation in the community because the patron is not concerned with it, and because families have no ownership of the land (only the Picón family has a few fruit trees in their lot).



D. Miguel Vitalino Picón's banana trees and coffee plants. There is very little reforestation in the community because there is no ownership of the land. (15)



Water source of D. Ramón de la Cruz. When it doesn't rain people get lots of diseases.

There is no electricity in Agua Blanca. The only one who has electricity is the administrator of the finca. That is because in the house of the patron there is a motor that produces energy. INDE promised that the community was going to have electricity before they built the dam.

The road that reaches the community is in bad shape. There are four paths from the community to San Cristóbal. It takes 3 hours on foot. On the street of the terracería there is transportation only on Thursdays and Sundays. The bus leaves at 3:30 a.m. and it arrives to San Cristóbal at 5.30 or 6.00 a.m. The ticket costs Q 5.00 to San Cristóbal and to Santa Cruz it costs Q 4.00.

The houses are built with local materials. They are of low quality and not appropriate. There is lack of construction materials and economic resources to build good houses.

The community school is not sufficient for the need there is. It is of bad quality. There is also need for a health post, because there is only a simple little house.

Transportation is very expensive. You can contract a car to leave or to come back and it costs Q 60.00 or Q 80.00, depending on if the truck stops at the entrance of the community or if it goes to the center of the community. Therefore, and emergency costs Q 100.00.



The health post is a very simple little house. There is need for a better health post. (44)



D. Pablo Reginaldo de la Cruz knows how to build houses. The problem is that there is lack of materials and resources to build better houses. (82)

Problems in the Life of the Community

One of the most prominent problems is the lack of jobs. Last year the patrón planted 4 *manzanas* (64 jobs). Each job (25 yards) is a day of work and pays Q 20.00. Very few families can benefit from this. Also, the planting organized by the patrón is done on the best community lands. The families are obliged to plant their crops in poor soils. The tractor from the finca cannot be used by the families in the community.

There is lack of work in the community. Many men have to go to the capital, Petén or to close by fincas looking for work. Women work at home and have not income. What is planted and the harvest is just enough for internal consumption.

The community needs to produce more food. Even though we consume corn, beans, manioc, *malanga*, herbs and fruits, it is not enough. We need to plant more.

The community needs to have better access to health care. Once a month a doctor comes to see patients that that are not enough for the needs we have. The medicines, even though it is free, it is scarce and you always have to buy it. They only give you medicines when you have an appointment, not when you have needs.

Sometimes the volunteer firemen come when there is a health emergency, but they charge Q 50.00. The most common illnesses in the community are diarrhea, malaria, flu and there is also lots of malnutrition.



Milpa of D. Benjamín de la Cruz. We need to work better lands because the present situation is very critical. (22)



People in Agua Blanca feel that they are not well organized. There is need for better communication. (13)

To improve the education of the community we need more teachers and grades. We also need education for adults, and for parents to be concerned about the education of their children. It is important that all families send their children to school. Parents need to collaborate with the teachers.

The people in the community feel that they are not well organized. There is also need to improve the work of the committees and seek community support. There is need for better communication.

Families are not at peace because they feel that the respect that there use to be, no longer exists. Traditions are being forgotten and new customs, foreign to the community are brought in. The community wishes to rescue old values, such as respect for the elderly and nature, and to encourage parents to teach good manners to children.

Community Proposals

Our main proposal is to work and fight so that INDE complies with its promises; and to seek that the Government, INDE and the World Bank comply with their responsibility for resettling the community providing better life conditions.

This community wants to work for our rights, along with the other affected communities by the Chixoy dam. We are willing to take all necessary measures to achieve the compliance of those promises. The community is aware that it cannot solve all these great needs by itself. We need the support of the Government and agencies, and INDE's and the World Bank's support.

The community wishes for the following government agencies as it pertains, to participate in the solution of our problems:

- The Land Fund (FONTIERRA), addressing the need of land with good quality soils.



- The Fund for Social Investment (FIS), the National Fund for Peace (FONAPAZ), the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health in guidance and technical support to improve our production, and in the construction of infrastructure in the community.

The community wishes for the support of agencies. Agua Blanca receives very little institutional support.



D. Manuel Suram was community researcher until January 2004. (80)



D. Emiliano Picón was community researcher until January 2004. (99)



D. Víctor Aroldo Hernández started as community researcher in February 2005. (142)

Credits

This report contains the results of the investigation conducted in the Agua Blanca, Community, San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz, during October 2003 to September 2004. This information was obtained and compiled through personal interviews with community members, community meetings, visits, talks and photographs. This report contains the community book written by the groups of researchers.

Additional participation in the elaboration of this report was received by community researchers Emiliano Picón, Manuel Suram and Víctor Aroldo Hernández; and Rolando Cujá and Iñaki Aguirre from Rights Action.

Additional collaboration and participation include Juan Hernández, member of the Community Council for Development, and other community members such as member Miguel Angel Vitalino Picón, Pablo Reginaldo de la Cruz and Leopoldo Picón.