



13. COMUNIDAD SAN JUAN LAS VEGAS Cubulco, Baja Verapaz

Introduction

Eleven families live in the community. People migrated to this community from the Colonia El Naranjo because of the difficulties at the colonia El Naranjo to get jobs, work the land, have animal farms and gather wood, etc.

The name of the village comes from long time ago. These lands were pasture lands for de *cofradía* (religious brotherhood) of San Juan. The *cofrades* lived in the neighborhood of San Juan in Cubulco. The name of the community emerged from there. In those times the land was communal and belonged to the village. Later on the land was privatized. Families that historically lived there are the owners now. The river valley was flooded by the Chixoy dam.

About 60 years ago there was an insect (*broca*) plague that killed the pines by the sides of today's reservoir. The only tree that was not affected was the "Yague". There used to be pines all over the place long time ago. We don't know how the "broca" got here.



Some community peopled from the San Juan Las Vegas community got together at the school. (037)



Damages Caused by the Dam

The construction of the dam locked people out. There wasn't a way for getting in or out. INDE got some workers to open up a path to Chicruz, but it was very difficult to get there. People had to remove rocks and vines to get through. Later on COGAT gave support to open up the road to Chicruz. The community provided labor in exchange for food (corn, beans and oil).

At present, it is still very difficult to go from Pacaní to the village, especially when the level of the reservoir goes down in the summer. People have to travel with loads through difficult roads full of mud. There is a need of a road from Pacaní to the community. The road could also reach Chicruz and benefit that village also.

When the reservoir was not there it was not difficult to work. There was the river valley to plant. Now people are in the 8-20 measurement. They are on the side of the mountains. You cannot plant there. The level of the water went up about 20 meters when they built the dam.

The river valley was very productive. Now many families have to buy corn to survive. There are times that production is not enough to satisfy the need. Before we used to get two crops a year and the land was more productive.

The trees planted by the side of the river: oranges, jocotales, zapote, bananas, avocados ... They were all flooded by the water. And INDE did not pay the real price that those trees had. People feel deceived. Before we used to sell fruit in town. Now we have to buy it.

We also lost corn, beans and peanut fields.

The most common illness in the community is malaria. Before they came to give us medicine. But now, no one comes, especially since level of the reservoir is low and it is difficult to go through.

The cultural life of the community has suffered due to the displacement and lack of people. We do not hold in the community many of the festive or spiritual activities that we used to have: the day of the cross, marimba, dances, celebrations of our customs. The church is under water.



Community of San Juan Las Vegas, side of the reservoir. When the water is low it is difficult to get across because of the mud. (02)



The more fertile lands were flooded. Now we have to plant in the side of the mountains and the land is not as good. (38)

Community resources

Water

Some the hills close to the village have water sources, which have water even in the summer. Some creeks slope down from there to the Chixoy River. There is water in the Pacuñas hill, Palo Verde, and in the Talpetate hill ...

The community gets water from 3 water sources which a somewhat far away (creeks). But some of the families have to get their water from the reservoir because they don't have access to those water sources. In the summer there is a lot of mud on the path and they cannot go wash clothing or fetch water.

The river is contaminated by the sewage from the town, which ends up in the river. The water these families drink is contaminated.

Some families hooked up a pipe from the water source and are able to get some water for consumption, to bathe or to give to the animals

Land

There were (communal?) land titles before the dam construction in the municipality of Cubulco. Other people have private land titles.

The land by the side of the reservoir is good. But the land of the hills is not good. Some families have lots in the community. The plant corn and beans there (an average of half a manzana per family). The families that don't have lots plant in their neighbors properties, depending on their willingness. Maicillo is also planted and on the areas of the reservoir when the water level goes down we plant ayote or peanuts. It depends on each person.

When the winter is not good, the milpa is not good. It is only enough for family consumption.



Milpa of D. Rogelio Cruz Ruiz. When the winter is not good, the milpa is not good. (33)



Some families bring water by gravity. Water faucet of Pila de D. Gregorio Ruiz Tecú (05)

Resources for Food Production

The community's subsistence is based on fishing, agriculture and animal husbandry. The women work mostly at home and in a lesser degree make petates, huipiles, table cloths or napkins. D. Pablo de la Cruz is the only person that knows how to find beehives and get honey.

It is difficult to plant fruit trees because the land is dry and the trees do not send out roots. Some families have planted jocote, limes and achote.

Some families have chicken, pigs to fatten up, and cows, which yield more. Chickens are sold for Q.30.00 to Q.50.00. The pigs could cost Q.500.00 to Q.600.00 and the cows can be sold for Q.3,000.00. The cows produce milk and meat. Some families don't have any and other have more than 10 cows. The cows are kept in pastures somewhat far away from the community and are left untied. Some families also have ducks and turkeys.

The community gathers wood in their own land, even though they have not planted many trees. To get wood is hard work. They have to gather wood from the tops of the hills.



Dña Anita Ruiz de la Cruz feeding her chickens. (022)



D. Pablo de la Cruz is the only person in the community that knows about bees and how to find beehives. (07)



Achiote of Dña. Magdalena Ávila Jerónimo. It is difficult to plant fruit trees because the land is very dry. (13)



The family of D. Balbino de la Cruz Teletor. It is hard work to get wood in en San Juan Las Vegas. You have to get it from the top of the hills. (09)

Infrastructure

To get to the community of San Juan Las Vegas you have to take a boat from the port in the village of Pacaní on the Chicruz River. The Chicruz River is a tributary of the Negro River or Chixoy. The boat trip or by canoes takes about 20 minutes.

You can get from Cubulco to the Pacaní village by car. It takes a bit more than an hour and the fare is Q.1.50. It takes two hours to walk.

On the banks of the Chicruz River there is a path that takes you to the Chicruz village. This path also gives you access to the village of Xococ and to Rabinal.

The school was opened in 1978. The villagers' efforts succeeded in the creation of the school. INDE built a wood and tin roof room. That was the first community school. INDE also had to pay the teacher. The children were not able to go to their old school in Chicruz because of the reservoir. INDE had to build the school. Later the agency



COGAT arrived and built today's school. Back then it was built as a provisional school, but it remained as the school.

The community needs a good boat for transportation and fishing.

Institutional Support

The community has received very little institutional support. Not all the projects have produced the expected results:

- For example, COGAT tried to build a water hole for a tomatoe project. They laid out the cement to build the "tapado" and put drip hoses. The project was a failure because they did not put a water regulator and the water went out too hard and damaged the tomatoe plants. That was the end of that project.
- FONAPAZ helped with solar panels. Some families did not want the panels at the beginning because they had to pay some money. When they changed their minds, it was too late. Only 6 of the 11 houses have solar panels, as well as the school. The panels are good for 3 light bulbs per house.
- There is a need for electricity. The solar panels are not enough. They are only good for tow or three days. Whelh the electricity goes out you have to use ocote and candil.

COGAT gave support for the construction of the school. Caritas helped with the outhouses.

To get good crops we need to use fertilizers. Even though the most important thing is the water (if there is too much summer the harvest if not good). Some families are composting with SHARE's help, but we still need to see what are the results.

SHARE also helps with soil conservation, and by building rock fences and we can get rice, oil and beans. Families with young children can get some food.



D. Rogelio Cruz Ruiz and his family show us their solar panel build with the support of FONAPAZ. Nevertheless there is need of electricity. (028)



The outhouses were built with the support of Caritas.. Photo: the wall of the outhouse of D. Balbino de la Cruz y Dña. Blanca Luvia Reyes (39)



SHARE supports with food for children under three years old. Family of Dña. Angelina Cruz Ruiz (24)



The families have obtained rice, oil and beans building rock fences to avoid erosion.. D. Gregorio Ruiz Tecú and his family have been helped by SHARE (03)

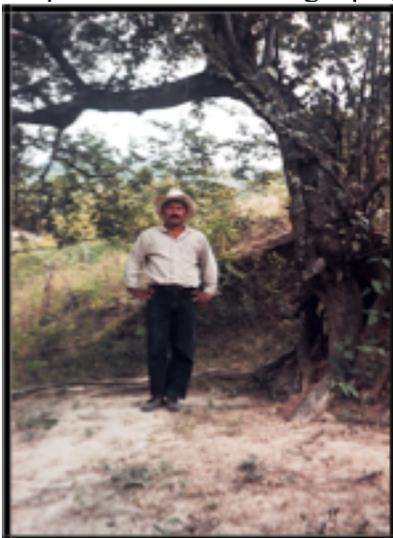


On the Life of the Community

Health: When there are vaccination campaigns, a nurse comes to the community. But no always. You also have to take the children to the communities of Pacaní or Chicruz.

When people get sick they have to be taken to town, to the health post or to the hospital. There is a health center in Chitomax, but we don't use it because it doesn't provide many services and it is far away. People travel to town paying 3 Q. from the road (Pacaní). Then there is a need to pay for a private car because the illness is severe you have to pay Q.50.00. Consultation costs Q 1.00 at the hospital and when there are no medicines the families take the prescription to the community. If they have money they can buy medicine; if not they can't get it and they cannot get well.

There are no health promoters in the community. There is a midwife but she is too old. She doesn't have title or papers. Nevertheless she always goes with the women to the hospital. When women get pregnant they go to town because it is safer.



The community lacks health services .People have to travel to town. Photo: D. Eusebio Ruiz de la Cruz. (026)



Dña. Rufina Ruiz Raymundo is 65 years old. She has been a midwife for 25 years. She says she already learned and it is not difficult. (21)



- Before many medicinal plants were planted to fight diseases. The problem is that now the plants do not grow and die. The plants used before were quino, cortán, tinta cerón... Now they do not grow here. Now we use caparachí, mint, apazote and ruda. they are used for stomachache, body pains and disentery. Quiebramuela is a plant used for toothache.
- Eucaliptus is used for coughing. For malaria you mixed it up with lemon and mangoe well cooked. You bathe with the water of these plants.



*Quiebramuelas is used for toothache.
(01)*

Education: Fifteen children of first to fifth grade go to school. Some children study in town in the El Naranjo. A big problem is that teachers change all the time. Till now teachers only come by contracts. We need teachers built in the budget. The teacher we have now is responsible.

Production and Income Generation:

When the water level goes down in the reservoir, people plant there. You can get a harvest if the water doesn't go up. If the water goes up the plants remain underwater and all work is lost. Some families have their lands in the reservoir and they plant vegetables.

To know if the level of the reservoir is going up or not, and thus to know if you can plant your milpa or vegetables, people have a signal: the "cabañuelas". The cabañuelas means that you have to observe the weather certain days of the year beginning with the first of January. You look and see if it is cloudy or clear, if there is a lot of water or not too much ... The cabañuelas tell us if the water of going to go up or not. The problem is that sometimes this signs are wrong. For example, in 2002 they did not plant anything because the community thought the water lever of the reservoir was going to go up. But it did not and they lost that opportunity. And in 2000 people planted and the water went up and they all lost their crops.

Because production is low, we only plant for consumption. It is not enough to take to the market. The families have to go to town to get a little bit of town. For cleaning up the fields you get Q.20.00 per day



Some people go to the coast to cut wood. That is really hard work and not all can stand the heat. You leave at 5.00 a.m. and get back at 8.00 or 9.00 PM. But if the worker can produce 7 to 8 tons per day, the pay is good. They are paying Q.10.00 to Q.10.50 per ton.

In January and February fishing begins. The transmayo, nets and hooks are used. When you have some fish you can sell it in Cubulco. Tilapia, guapote and trout sell for Q.3.00 per pound. When the fish are big they sell for Q.5.00 per pound.

Some women know how to weave petates and embroid huipiles. The petates sell for Q.12.00 in Cubulco. Some men make matates, hammocks or fishing nets.



Dña. Odilia Elizabeth shows us a huipil she made. Other women know how to make petates or napkins. (25)



D. Salvador Santiago Reyes and his family. When he catches fish he sells it in town. (17)

Social Organization

The community is organized through the Parents Association. They are legally inscribed and seek meeting minutes. The main task of this association is to manage the school funds for the children's food. The women cook the food. They organize in groups.

Even though the community is comprised by a few families, it is not United and some times there are problems. Not all families are in agreement. To reach agreements it is necessary to have good communication.

It is necessary to strengthen the organization of the community. And effort should be made to work together and united. Someone proposed to create a committee pro-betterment of the organization.

When a message is sent to the community it is done through the radio. This is the main system we use, for example if the Colonia El Naranjo needs to send a message. The problem is that sometimes the people in town do not listen to the radio.



D. Vicente Raymundo, presidente del comité de padres de familia, junto con su esposa. Las mujeres están organizadas para dar la alimentación a los niños y niñas (19).

Every Day Life

The community only celebrates Mothers Day and September 15. On those days funds are collected for refreshments or lunch. Each family celebrates Christmas among themselves. We make supes, which are bean tamales with seeds. During Easter families make tamales for their friends.

Women stay home making tortillas. That is work, but they do not earn anything. Women are the first ones to wake up in the morning, at 4 AM. They make the fire, coffee, and the torrillas. They grind the corn. At 6.30 AM everything is ready for when the man leaves for work.

Women have breakfast at 8.00 AM. Then they sweep the floor, do the dishes, wash clothing in the river ... If there is fish they prepare it a cook it. Dinner is at 6 PM. The husbands go to bed at 7 PM. And women at 8 PM. Alter they are done with all house chores. Women have manual grinders (they cost Q.129.00). Women work with pots, comal, etc. To wash clothing in the river they use a washboard. They can't wash on the rocks because the water level goes up.

The older children go to school at 7.30 AM. to clean it up. Classes begin at 8 AM to 12:30 PM. When they get out of school in the afternoon, these children run errands or play.



Satrar Enrique taking care of her animals. Women are the first ones to wake up and the last to go to bed. (18)



Family of D. Pablo de la Cruz. The community celebrates Mothers Day and September 15. (10)

Credits

This report contains the results of the fieldwork conducted in the San Juan Las Vegas community on December 4, 2003. The study aims to identify the damages suffered by the community during the construction of the Chixoy Dam, identify the activities of the community and the most important community needs. The following were the activities conducted:

- Meeting with the community.
- Personal interviews
- Field reconnaissance. Photos.

This study was possible thanks to the work and support of researchers from the affected communities: Salvador Santiago (San Juan Las Vegas), Victoriano Díaz Pérez (Colonia El Naranjo) and Alejandro Chen (Pacux Resettlement).

The research received the support of members of the board the Association Nueva Unión Maya Achí from Cubulco, D. Alejandro Ruiz y D. Juan Morente Vásquez.



This study was possible thanks to the work of researchers from the affected communities and the support of the Association Nueva Unión Maya Achi and Rights Action. Photo: Alejandro Ruiz, Rolando Cujá, Salvador Santiago, Victoriano Díaz Pérez, Alejandro Chen and Juan Morente Vásquez. (41)

