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Grassroots Leaders within the Salvadoran Indigenous Rights Movement

SURF Conference Panel Session 8

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Introduction

“After 520 years the pueblo is becoming visible, and I believe this is the moment for the true pueblo to flourish.”^[1]

Margot Pérez, President of the Consejo de Pueblos Originarios Náhuat Pipil de Nahuizalco
(COPONAPN)

Regional Forum of Indigenous Peoples and Afrodescendientes
Parlamento Centroamericano, Guatemala City, Guatemala

El Salvador is one of the few Latin American countries where indigenous rights do not officially exist within the laws and policies of the state.^[2] My research focuses on three dimensions of the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement: How does the Salvadoran government appropriate the pueblo indígena for its own political agenda? How do grassroots leaders challenge the dominance of NGOs within the movement? How do grassroots leaders participate within the movement without the material resources or institutional networks of an NGO? For the purposes of this text, I will focus on the last question through a case study of COPONAPN, a grassroots council at the forefront of the movement. My research will illustrate how COPONAPN’s community empowerment projects and political participation form an emancipatory system for the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement.

1 “Foro de pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes (largo) parte 1,” Youtube video, 9:28, posted by “parlamento centro-americano,” August 8, 2013, <https://www.Youtube.Com/watch?V=lid9gj7rrn0>

2 Juliet Hooker. “Indigenous inclusion / black exclusion: race, ethnicity, and multicultural citizenship in latin america.” *Journal of latin american studies* 37 (2005): 285, accessed may 1 2013, doi: 10.1017/60022216x05009016.



Figure 1. A map of El Salvador.^[3]
Nahuizalco and San Salvador are located
in the western half of the country.



Figure 2. A map of Central America.^[4]
El Salvador borders Guatemala and
Honduras.

3 “El Salvador.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, 1 august 2013. Web. 1 August 2013.

4 “Central America.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, 20 November 2013. Web. 30 November 2013.

Methodology

During June and July 2013, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Nahuizalco, El Salvador, with the Consejo de Pueblos Originarios Náhuat Pipil de Nahuizalco. I did participant observation during COPONAPN's day-to-day activities, which included consultations and empowerment projects with the indigenous communities of Nahuizalco and its surrounding rural areas (see Figure 3). I collected data about these activities through field notes, photos, and videos. After a month in Nahuizalco, I conducted open-ended interviews about indigenous identity, politics, and rights with members of COPONAPN's community-based network.

The Centro de Desarrollo Artesanal in Nahuizalco served as the primary site for my fieldwork in Nahuizalco. CEDART is located near the main town square in Nahuizalco. The Consejo Nacional de Micro y Pequeño Empresas (CONAMYPE), an institution of the Salvadoran Ministry of Economy, administers CEDART. I spent the majority of time with the Mesa Artesanal de Nahuizalco, a group of artesanos (craft workers) at CEDART who self-identify as indigenous and maintain their ancestral indigenous cultural practice of making artesanía out of natural fibers native to Nahuizalco. CEDART provides critical institutional support to COPONAPN, as it serves as the primary venue for COPONAPN's community empowerment projects and meeting space for COPONAPN and their project collaborators. COPONAPN gained access to CEDART because Margot Pérez, the President of COPONAPN, is also the president of the CEDART-sponsored Mesa Artesanal de Nahuizalco and the CONAMYPE-sponsored Mesa Nacional de Desarrollo Artesanal.

Outside of Nahuizalco, I accompanied COPONAPN to pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran institutions in San Salvador, El Salvador (see Figure 4). These meetings sought to incorporate the interests of indigenous Salvadoran communities into the institutions of the Salvadoran state.^[5] I conducted participant observation during these meetings and collected field notes, photos, and videos on the power dynamics between COPONAPN, CCNIS, and government officials. I also conducted informal conversations with university-based groups, government officials, and grassroots leaders who participated in these meetings but were not members of CCNIS' network to learn more about indigenous identity, politics, and rights at the national level.

5 the specific purpose of the Dirección Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas y Diversidad Cultural is “to promote the recognition of the pueblo indígena at the normative level, facilitate the inclusion of indigenous issues within different governmental institutions, and support the cultural manifestations of the pueblo indígena” (Government of El Salvador, Ministry of External Affairs, *Décimo Sexto y Décimo Séptimo Informes de la República de El Salvador Presentados al Comité Sobre la Eliminación de la Discriminación Racial*, 2013, 5). Pro-indigenous meetings with other Salvadoran institutions shared similar goals with the Dirección Nacional.

Date (2013)	Community Empowerment Project	Theme	Collaborators	Location (Nahuizalco)
6/2	“El Dia de la Familia: Aprendamos Nuestros Derechos”	N/A	Professor-led student group from Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador	CEDART
6/9	Sensunapan River Clean Up	Environment	~50 volunteers from Nahuizalco rural communities	Cicimitepeque - rural comm.
6/15 – 6/24	“Feria Nacional de Artesanías”	Artesanía	Mesa Nacional de Desarrollo Artesanal, Tiangué Ancestral, Asociación de Turismo	Centro Escolar Brito
7/16 – 7/17	Rebuilt House for an Elderly Indigenous Women	Youth / Elderly	Union Salvadoreño de Estudiantes Universitarios (US), Centro Cultural Techantit (LA)	San Ramon - rural comm.
7/18	Dug Four Pools to Farm Tilapia	N/A	Union Salvadoreño de Estudiantes Universitarios (US), Centro Cultural Techantit (LA)	Stream behind CEDART
6/1 – 7/31 Most Sundays	Hot Lunch for Local Elderly Indigenous Women	Elderly	Local volunteers, university groups, private donors	CEDART

Figure 3. The table above lists some of COPONAPN’s community empowerment projects I attended during June and July 2013. Due to limited space, this table does not contain detailed information about COPONAPN’s role in the projects, the role of its collaborators, COPONAPN’s relationship with its collaborators, or an assessment of the successes and limitations of the projects.

Location: San Salvador	Date (2013)
Meeting: Multisectorial para Pueblos Indígenas: "Política Pública para la Población Indígena de El Salvador" Host institution: La Dirección Nacional de Pueblo Indígenas y Diversidad Cultural, Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia	6/12, 7/2, 7/27
Meeting: Consulta de Pueblos Indígenas Host Institution: Mesa Rectora de Pueblos Indígenas FMLN	6/5, 6/12, 7/6
Meeting: Mesa Permanente de la PDDH Sobre Derechos de Pueblos Indigenas Host Institution: Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos	6/27, 7/2
Meeting: Yulcuicat (Indigenous Rights and Culture Event) Host Institution: Departamento de Letras, Facultad de Ciencias y Humanidades, Universidad de El Salvador	6/26
Meeting: Mesa Nacional de Desarrollo Artesanal Host Institution: Comisión Nacional de la Micro y Pequeña Empresa, Ministerio de Economía (CONAMYPE)	6/13, 6/20, 7/4
Meeting: Mesa de Diálogo entre Pueblos Indígenas y Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales Host institution: Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales	7/8

Figure 4. COPONAPN participated in the pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran institutions in San Salvador listed below. This list only includes the meetings that I attended during June and July 2013. It does not contain all of the meetings COPONAPN participated in with the institutions listed below, nor does it contain the meetings at these institutions that COPONAPN received an invitation for but could not attend. It also does not include COPONAPN's meetings with NGOs and university-based groups in San Salvador to plan and execute community empowerment projects in Nahuizalco and its surrounding rural communities.

The Consejo Coordinador Nacional de Indígenas Salvadoreños (CCNIS) has led the dominant system of NGOs and grassroots leaders within the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement since the mid-1990s. CCNIS claims to represent all indigenous Salvadorans, but it faced criticism in the early 2000s that it did not represent anyone and exploited international sources of pro-indigenous funding for the primary benefit of its members.^[6] I heard similar allegations against CCNIS from grassroots leaders, government officials, and university-based groups during my time in El Salvador. Despite these persistent and troubling allegations, CCNIS remains the most visible non-government actor to international observers of the movement.^[7]

The Consejo de Pueblos Originarios Náhuat Pipil de Nahuizalco offers an alternate grassroots system for the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement. COPONAPN has been a grassroots council at the forefront of the movement since the late 2000s. COPONAPN's core membership is composed of a small yet dedicated group of volunteers that worked toward the "conservation and protection of indigenous peoples" in El Salvador.^[8] Margot Pérez is the President of COPONAPN, and Pedro Rodriguez is its Vice President. When I left El Salvador at the end of July 2013, COPONAPN was considering expanding its core membership in order to meet its increasing commitments to community empowerment projects and pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran and international institutions.^[9]

6 Virginia Tilley, *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 41.

7 The United Nations' report on the situation of indigenous peoples in El Salvador identifies CCNIS as the primary representative of indigenous Salvadorans at pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran government institutions. This UN report makes no mention of COPONAPN, even though COPONAPN and CCNIS participated in many of the same meetings at the same Salvadoran government institutions (United Nations, General Assembly, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, *The Situation of Indigenous Peoples in El Salvador*, 2013, 11). My long-term research will explore the political implications of COPONAPN's lack of visibility to international observers, as international institutions provide crucial material, legal, political, and technological support to actors within the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement (Virginia Tilley, "New Help or New Hegemony? The Transnational Indigenous Peoples' Movement and 'Being Indian' in El Salvador," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, No. 3 (2002): 525–544).

COPONAPN

A Grassroots System

Community Empowerment Projects

At the local level, COPONAPN consults members of the indigenous communities of Nahuizalco and the surrounding rural areas in order to plan and execute community empowerment projects, which are community service projects with the long-term goal of improving the cultural, political, legal, and material conditions of the local indigenous communities. Since COPONAPN is not an NGO and does not receive sufficient or consistent resources, it collaborates with NGOs, government institutions, university-based groups, community leaders, and private donors on its projects. Most of these projects fall into one of five thematic categories: artesanía (handicrafts), medio ambiente (environment), abuelitas (elderly women), jóvenes (youth), and idioma (language) (refer back to Figure 3). One of COPONAPN's most significant achievements at the local level was its role as a primary contributor to the creation of the 2011 Municipal Ordinance on the Rights of the Indigenous Communities of Nahuizalco, the first municipal-level law in the history of El Salvador to guarantee rights to local indigenous communities; no similar piece of legislation exists at the national level to date.^[10]

8 COPONAPN's 2013 Plan de Trabajo (unpublished).

9 COPONAPN's core members do not receive financial compensation for the many hours they volunteer to their work. This makes it difficult for COPONAPN to recruit core members from the local indigenous communities, as most community leaders are impoverished and must earn an income to support their families.

10 Government of El Salvador, Ministry of Governance, *Official Journal*, 2011, Pub. 126 (11–17), San Salvador.

Pro-indigenous Meetings with Salvadoran and International Institutions

Community empowerment projects at the local level support COPONAPN's claim of representing the indigenous communities of Nahuizalco at the national and international levels of the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement. COPONAPN participates in pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran institutions at the national level in order to improve the cultural, legal, political, and material conditions of indigenous Salvadoran communities (see Figure 2 above).

Outside of El Salvador, COPONAPN participates in regional forums for indigenous peoples at the Central American level. During June and July 2013, COPONAPN participated in the Parlamento Centroamericano's Foro Regional con Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes in Guatemala and the Segundo Encuentro Centroamericano de los Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes in Nicaragua. At the international level, COPONAPN has attended the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for the past two years. During the 2013 UN Permanent Forum, COPONAPN President Margot Pérez presented a scathing declaration against the Salvadoran government's violations of the rights of indigenous Salvadoran communities to the Permanent Forum's general body assembly.^[11] COPONAPN participates in these pro-indigenous forums outside of El Salvador in order to draw external pressure on the Salvadoran government to incorporate the interests of indigenous Salvadoran communities into the decision-making processes of the state.^[12]

11 "Intervención de Margot Pérez en 12° UNPFII," YouTube Video, 5:29, posted by "Organismo Naleb," May 27, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MJcQ9f_o4I

12 My long-term research will discuss how COPONAPN is able to participate in pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran and international institutions without the material resources and institutional networks of an NGO.

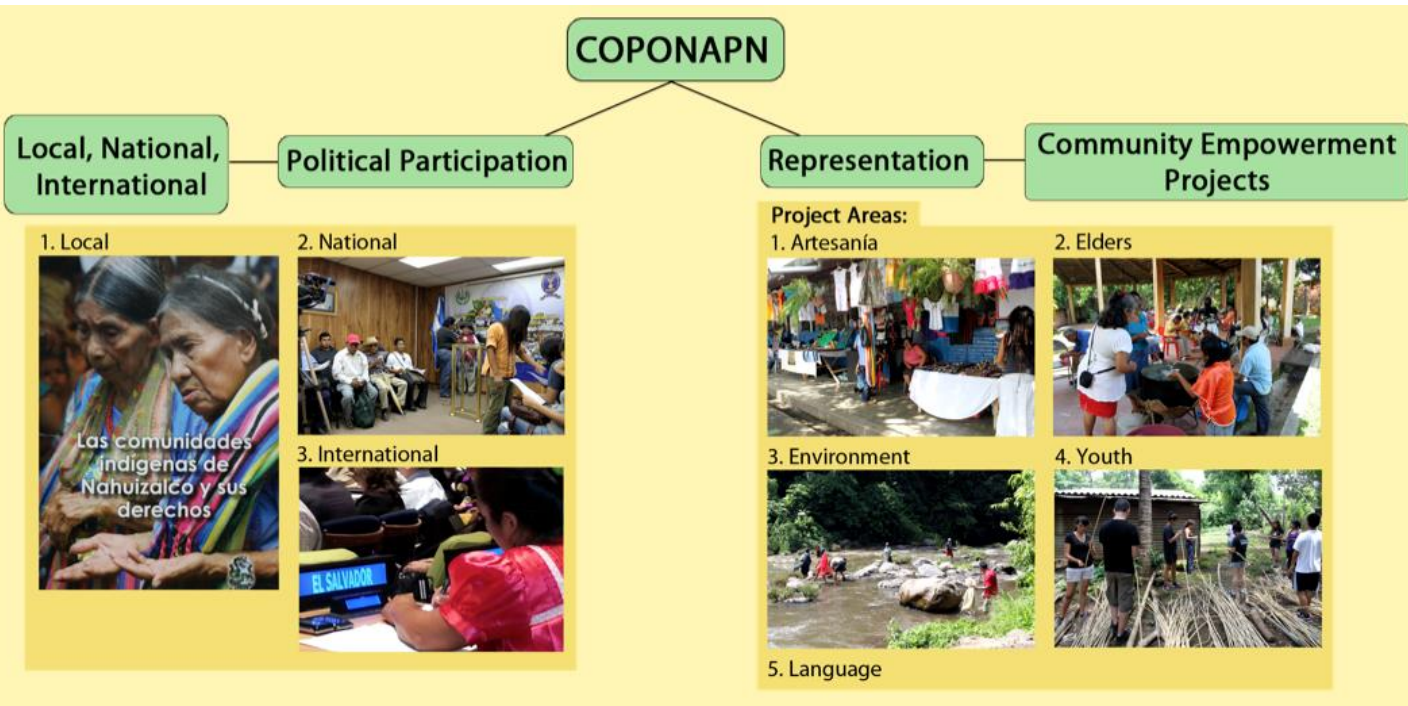


Figure 5. [13]

13 All photos unless otherwise noted were taken by me. The photo for “3. International” was taken by Elizandro Umaña at the 2013 UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

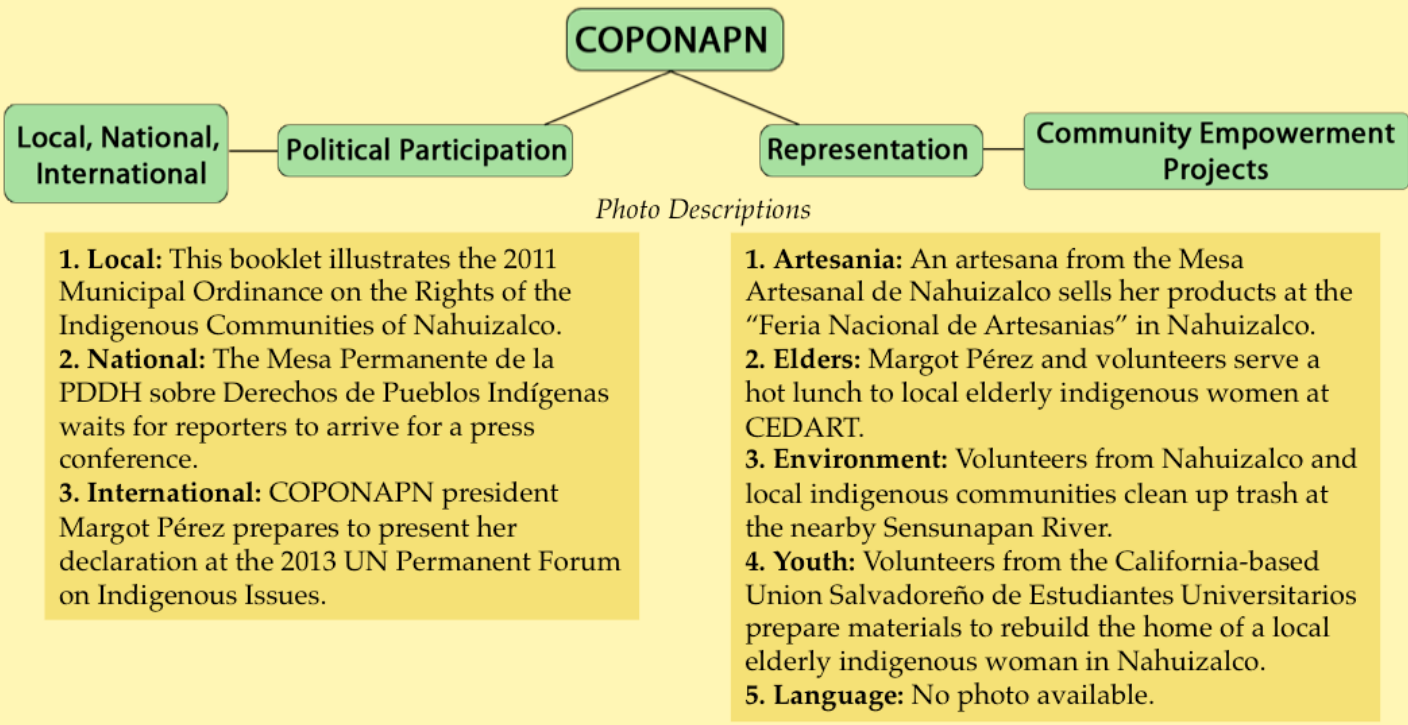


Figure 6.

Conclusion

CCNIS, the dominant system of NGOs, and grassroots leaders within the Salvadoran indigenous rights movement continue to face serious allegations: it does not represent anyone, and it profits from international funds meant for indigenous Salvadoran communities. COPONAPN, a grassroots system within the movement, offers an alternate system for the movement. COPONAPN's community empowerment projects in Nahuizalco support its claim of representing the indigenous communities of Nahuizalco at pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran and international institutions. COPONAPN remains marginalized within the movement in relation to CCNIS, in part due to its lack of visibility to international observers. Ultimately, a more emancipatory movement toward indigenous rights in El Salvador must embrace a grassroots system like that of COPONAPN.

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Figures

Figure 1.

Name: Map of El Salvador

Description: Nahuizalco and San Salvador are located in the western half of the country.

Source: “El Salvador.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, 1 August 2013. Web. 1 August 2013.

Figure 2.

Name: Map of Central America

Description: El Salvador borders Guatemala and Honduras.

Source: “Central America.” Map. *Google Maps*. Google, 20 November 2013. Web. 30 November 2013.

Figure 3.

Name: COPONAPN’s Community Empowerment Projects

Description: This table lists some of COPONAPN’s community empowerment projects I attended during June and July 2013. Due to limited space, this table does not contain detailed information about COPONAPN’s role in the projects, the role of its collaborators, COPONAPN’s relationship with its collaborators, or an assessment of the successes and limitations of the projects.

Figure 4.

Name: COPONAPN’s Participation in Pro-Indigenous Meetings at Salvadoran Institutions in San Salvador

Description: This table lists the pro-indigenous meetings with Salvadoran institutions that COPONAPN attended in San Salvador. It only includes the meetings that I attended during June and July 2013. It does not contain all of the meetings COPONAPN participated in with the institutions listed below, nor does it contain the meetings at these institutions that COPONAPN received an invitation for but could not attend. It also does not include COPONAPN’s meetings with NGOs and university-based groups in San Salvador to plan and execute community empowerment projects in Nahuizalco and its surrounding rural communities.

Figure 5.

Name: COPONAPN: A Grassroots System

Source: All photos unless otherwise noted were taken by me. The photo for “3. International” was taken by Elizandro Umaña at the 2013 UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Figure 6.

Name: COPONAPN: A Grassroots System

