



# The violence of disavowing Indigenous governance: exposing the colonial politics of "development" and FPIC in the Caribbean

Toledo Anonymous Collective,<sup>1</sup> Levi Gahman,<sup>2</sup> Filiberto Penados, Shelda-Jane Smith

## Abstract

After decades of community mobilizing and a protracted legal battle, Maya villages in southern Belize won a watershed Indigenous land rights victory in the Caribbean Court of Justice in 2015. Since then, the state has criminalized environmental defenders, violated communal land rights, and is argued by Maya activists and alcaldes (village leaders) to be operating in discriminatory bad faith. Accordingly, this Grassroots article casts critical light on a recent flashpoint conflict between the Government of Belize and Maya of Toledo District related to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). The article is directly informed by both the grounded knowledge of an autonomous movement engaged in frontline resistance, and participatory research that is rooted in a politics and spirit of "accompliceship." The structural analysis we offer from an explicitly anticolonial standpoint is instructive about the historical-imperial processes, social forces, and economic logics that underpin conventional approaches to both "development" and the state's duty to consult local communities. Ultimately, the article reveals the forms of political conflict and environmental degradation that continue to emerge globally at the juncture of capitalist development, (postcolonial) state power, and struggles for Indigenous self-determination.

## Keywords

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); Indigenous self-determination; Land rights; Latin America and the Caribbean; violence

*The land is our life. And we survive from our land.  
If we do not have land, what would we leave for  
our children tomorrow and the days to come?*  
– Anonymous Q'eqchi' Maya woman

## 1. Introduction

This article illustrates the contentious and colonial politics at hand with respect to how state-sponsored discourses of "development," Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) protocols, and denials of Indigenous people's self-determination and relationships with territory continue to facilitate dispossession and ecosystem destruction. In addition, we detail the local-global implications and forms of structural and "slow" violence, which refers to "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight and is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2011, 2), that emerge as a result of government sanctioned FPIC violations and disavowals of Indigenous customary governance. In so doing, the article adds to a growing body of "unsettling" scholarship (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018; Liboiron, 2021) that centers Indigenous ways of being (Awasis, 2020), connections to land (Simpson and Coulthard, 2014), and is evidencing the radical potentials of situated Indigenous approaches to resistance (Estes, 2019), autonomy (EZLN, 2016), environmental defence (Rius, Icaza, and Márquez, 2011),

<sup>1</sup> Several Maya activists from the district of Toledo in Belize who contributed to the piece but would like their names to remain confidential for reasons related to security and safeguarding.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Levi Gahman, Institute for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago & Dept. of Geography & Planning, University of Liverpool, UK. Email: [Levi.Gahman@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:Levi.Gahman@liverpool.ac.uk). Dr. Filiberto Penados, Center for Engaged Learning Abroad (CELA) and Galen University, Belize. Dr. Shelda-Jane Smith, Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool, UK.

and decolonization (Tuck and Yang, 2012). With specific regard to the eclectic "trickster" discipline of political ecology (Robbins, 2015), our aim is to further push the field in a decidedly *anticolonial* yet already established extra-academic direction (Batterbury, 2015). On this front, the article offers political ecology's diverse audience and pluralistic constituency a grassroots analysis that is co-authored by Indigenous activists and engaged "accomplices" who are contributing to an autonomous social movement via long-term research relationships which are guided by the "Four R's" (Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Relevance [Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991]).

Notably, rather than claiming to further develop abstruse academic theory or offering some sort of novel discursive intervention that is decoupled from grounded experience, material politics, and community engagement and trust—as has become fashionable within bourgeois scholarship that is divorced from commitments and accountability to social movements (Smith, Penados and Gahman, 2021)—we are explicitly seeking to *advance empirical understandings* of the Maya realities of southern Belize. Our contention and hope is that the vibrant and kaleidoscopic field of political ecology, which counts abolitionist (Heynen, 2018; Pitts *et al.*, 2022), ecosocialist (Chattopadhyay, 2019), feminist (Sultana, 2021), anarchist (Locret-Collet *et al.*, 2021), and participatory (Gomathy, 2022) approaches amongst its ranks, is a place where militant anticolonial politics, movement-engaged convivial research, and collaborative writing for critical consciousness will find a welcome home. Ultimately and intentionally, then, this *Grassroots* article is aimed at "reading the world from below" (Freire, 1985), fostering political education (Fanon, 1963), and enhancing awareness of just precisely what is at stake *apropos* state power, neoliberal development, Indigenous "resurgence" (Simpson, 2016), and struggles for sustainable life-giving futures "against plantation legacies and capitalist annihilation" (Gahman, 2020) in the Caribbean and beyond.

We begin with a summary of a recent conflict in southern Belize taking place between the state and rural Maya communities related to FPIC. We then situate the dynamics that are playing out on the ground in literature related to political ecology and environmental defense, before explaining what struggles for land and life look like in Latin America and the Caribbean. Following this, we define and introduce debates related to the complex politics of FPIC and detail how the Government of Belize is renegeing on its duty to consult Indigenous communities in good faith and is disavowing customary Maya governance. We then provide a summary of several crucial aspects of the Maya's practice of participatory democracy and self-determination in Toledo District before demonstrating how each are being undermined and attacked by the consolidated power, authoritarian nationalism, and "development" agendas of the state. We conclude by offering readers five key takeaways related to both the specific FPIC deadlock in question and the broader global implications and environmental challenges the volatile incident speaks to.

## **2. Land conflict and violence in Latin America and the Caribbean**

In late January 2022, the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) and Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) of southern Belize issued a joint press release announcing that Maya communities in Toledo District had been "ambushed" by the government. For context, the TAA is a representative body of autonomously selected or appointed traditional Indigenous village leaders (*alcaldes*<sup>3</sup>), while the MLA is an accompanying independent body comprised of political activists, former leaders, and elders who are contributing to the broader Maya struggle and movement to protect "territory, relations, and community." The declaration from the MLA-TAA, not to mention an ongoing row that subsequently emerged between the Maya and the state, directly stems from the Government of Belize unilaterally filing a FPIC protocol with the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ).

Government officials claimed to have properly consulted Maya communities before submitting the protocol to the CCJ and that the Maya collectively consented to and approved the state's new FPIC framework. The MLA-TAA continue to resolutely dispute the government's claim that meaningful, transparent consultation took place and are insisting that the state is speaking in bad faith and acting in an authoritarian manner. Specifically, Maya villagers and movement leaders are contending the state is not only abandoning its duty to

---

<sup>3</sup> The term is not italicized, following the conventions of the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) and Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA).

consult but also undermining the traditional governance system of the Maya communities, the *alcaldes*, by rejecting the legitimacy of the TAA. Notably, the TAA is a critical element of both Maya governance and unity that allows individual communities to come together to collectively deliberate, make decisions, and engage in concerted action on issues that will affect Maya communities and lands (Mesh, 2017). We provide an expanded overview of the *alcaldes* and TAA below. Grassroots activists in the MLA have explained that the Belizean Government's strategy of diminishing and dismissing the TAA is a deliberate attempt to undermine and divide Maya communities. At the time of this writing, the battle over the FPIC protocol in Toledo District rages on and both parties have doubled down on their aforementioned assertions.

To situate this conflict in the field of political ecology, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and in countries like Belize, comparatively large groups of Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant communities continue to experience persistent forms of enclosure, dispossession, displacement, and ecosystem destruction via "development" (Barandiarán & Walsh, 2017; Krause, 2020; Wainwright, 2008). Manifestations of structural and slow violence are frequently connected to capitalist extraction and inextricably linked to the historical trajectories and lasting legacies of empire, race, colonial power, class oppression, and statist nationalism (Iborra-Mallent & Palmer, 2021; Scoones *et al.*, 2018; Smith, 2021). Rural Indigenous, Afrodescendant and peasant groups, in particular, are negatively racialized and excluded from, and detrimentally impacted by, national and international economic "growth" agendas (Hernández Reyes, 2019; Konforti, 2021). Such projects are increasingly being marketed as "green", "sustainable", and necessary for "the development of the nation" (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen, 2017; Gahman, Thongs & Greenidge, 2021; Mollett, 2016).

Moreover, agrarian communities and subsistence farmers across the region consistently must contend with encroachments into their territories and homes. These incursions typically coincide with refusals by states and corporations to fulfil their duty to consult and seek consent through culturally safe processes of community engagement (Anaya & Puig, 2017). The deleterious ecological and social upshots of such development schemes, which are often minimized as "externalities" (Acosta, 2013), include but are not limited to: landlessness (Kapoor & Jordan, 2019); forced displacement (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020); abject poverty (Raftopoulos, 2017); the decimation of biodiversity and ecosystems (Ødegaard & Rivera Andía, 2019); ill-health due to contamination (Cielo & Coba, 2018); increases in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation (Muñoz and Villarreal, 2019); the destruction and desecration of heritage sites (Apaydin, 2020); loss of cultural identity and native languages (McCarty & Coronel-Molina, 2016); targeted smear campaigns; and assassinations (Méndez, 2018). In the face of a sobering reality that the region remains one of the deadliest in the world for environmental defenders (Menton & Le Billon, 2021), Indigenous and Afrodescendant autonomous movements and grassroots activists across Latin America and the Caribbean continue to demonstrate their political agency by organizing collective resistance; protecting land, water, and ecosystems; and defending their homes, communities, relations, and ways of being.

In Belize, the dispossession of Maya territories and destruction of ecosystems persists through state-sponsored land grabs and the attempted erasure of customary Indigenous forms of governance like the *alcaldes* (Penados, Gahman, & Smith, 2022). While it is generations old, the most recent iteration of the Maya struggle in Belize dates to the 1970s, shortly before the country became an independent nation. Attaining independence in 1981 means that Belize, formerly "British Honduras", is one of the newest members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Here, it is neither coincidental nor should it be overlooked that the Government of Belize maintains a hierarchical governance structure based upon the Westminster model—a colonial institution installed by the British Empire (Girvan, 2015). Hence, rather uniquely, Belize is part of Central America and the Caribbean and home to a pluralistic multi-ethnic society and tremendous biodiversity. But throughout the 1980s, there were intentional efforts to ignore and silence grassroots Maya communities who were concerned with preserving their culture, heritage, and food systems, as well as customary yet changing practices of communal governance, land management, and swidden agroforestry (i.e. *milpas*, Figure 1). Following the issuance of state-sanctioned logging concessions and a series of large-scale land acquisitions by multinational corporations in traditional Maya territories in Toledo District, the Maya began organizing for land rights and

against extractivism at both the grassroots and legal level (Wainwright, 2022). One pivotal aspect of their struggle for land is the protocol of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).



Figure 1: Maya *milpa* landscape of southern Belize. Source: [Julian Cho Society](#).

### 3. Development aggression and the fraught politics of FPIC

FPIC is the ostensible right Indigenous people have to refuse or permit development actions that may impact their communities and ancestral lands (Tomlinson, 2019). As a protocol and principle, it is endorsed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and authorizes Indigenous communities to negotiate the terms and conditions through which projects that will affect their territories will be developed, initiated, monitored, and assessed (Leifsen, 2017). Broadly, FPIC is meant to ensure that Indigenous people can grant or withhold consent after being fully and effectively informed ahead of time of what any given project entails. As a human rights standard, FPIC also stipulates that Indigenous communities must be able to deliberate free from coercion, manipulation, and intimidation, as well as via their own preferred systems of decision-making.

Adhering to the FPIC protocol is the responsibility of both governments and third-party actors (e.g. corporations) and a process that is applicable to a wide array of development agendas that purport to promote economic growth. This includes activities related to resource extraction, transportation networks, renewable energy infrastructure, conservation efforts, and ecotourism, amongst others (Youdelis *et al.*, 2021). While FPIC has gained a tremendous amount of international traction with respect to securing rights, mitigating environmental damage, and attenuating deforestation, numerous critical voices contend that the protocol might be best thought of as an imperfect tool or even trap that, at times, can be used to shield Indigenous groups and peasant communities from development aggression and the driving forces of capital accumulation (Dunlap, 2018; Schilling-Vacaflor & Flemmer, 2020).

As an instrument for safeguarding against land grabbing and partial aspect of self-determination, FPIC is a politically loaded and hotly contested protocol that also legitimizes and reproduces state power, liberal conceptions of rights, and Western worldviews, which often clash with Indigenous cosmologies and can

subvert Indigenous peoples' governance systems (Leydet, 2019). In many ways, rather than guaranteeing relative autonomy for Indigenous communities and putting an end to the colonial enterprise, i.e., capitalist exploitation, FPIC merely mediates it. Despite its limitations, however, the FPIC protocol can be an effective mechanism of accountability that communities and villagers can employ to defend their territories from development programs that result in extractive dispossession and ecological harm (Doyle, 2014). In essence, what is at stake in Belize regarding FPIC, then, is at once Indigenous people's right to self-determination, as well as their "reciprocal materialities" with the overall health of ecosystems (Larsen, 2016). Consequently, this latest dispute over FPIC has global significance and will carry international implications.

The implementation of the FPIC protocol in question in this case stems from a decades-long land struggle the Maya have been spearheading against the Government of Belize. The legal front of this clash resulted in an eventual breakpoint decision by the CCJ in 2015, which ruled in favor of the Maya and recognized their communal land rights and notions of complex tenure (Miss *et al.*, 2021). The 2015 CCJ compliance order, over which the court has retained jurisdiction, requires the Government of Belize to work in "good faith" with Maya communities, specifically the appellants, the MLA and TAA, to delimit and demarcate traditional Maya territories. As one of the first implementation steps, the CCJ has required that the state develop an FPIC protocol in consultation with the MLA-TAA, which has not come to fruition. Tellingly, the implementation process mandated by the CCJ has been dragged out by the Belizean government for over half a decade. During this time span, state-sponsored land grabs have continued, and additional court rulings have gone against the government for violations of customary land rights and the destruction of Maya farmlands and *milpas*.

#### **4. State power: Refusing consultation, removing "consent"**

As noted at the outset, immediately after news of the Government of Belize's FPIC filing broke, the MLA-TAA mobilized to specifically denounce the government's Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs, the office which played a pivotal role in submitting the FPIC protocol to the CCJ and demanded that Maya communities immediately socialize it. The MLA-TAA specified that no agreement was reached between the parties on the FPIC protocol, i.e., the Government of Belize and the appellants (the MLA and TAA), which is expected under the CCJ decision and implementation process. The MLA-TAA further noted that the state, in particular the Office of the Commissioner in the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, neither adequately consulted nor sought agreement for any revisions to the FPIC protocol, but, in fact, sidestepped the TAA not only as the appellant—but as a critical element of Maya governance. In so doing, the Commissioner of the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs equated the TAA with several NGOs, some of which are now defunct, which is an erroneous conflation that Maya alcaldes felt was "total disrespect." In effect, the government betrayed both the CCJ consent order and Maya communities by refusing to engage in meaningful consultation on the FPIC framework and by dismissing and circumventing the TAA as a vital component of Maya customary governance.

Additionally, in what local Maya environmental defenders are arguing is an audacious and authoritarian move, the Government of Belize, which has a track record of violating Maya land rights (Gahman, Greenidge & Mohamed, 2020), single-handedly changed the FPIC terminology from "consent" to "consultation." Meaning, the acronym FPIC, according to the Belizean government, is now a protocol related to Free, Prior, and Informed "*Consultation*"—rather than "Consent." The revision of the highly specific term "consent" to the more ambiguous word "consultation" is deeply significant because excising "consent" from the binding document shifts power away from Indigenous communities to the state. Such a deletion obstructs and denies the Maya's ability to refuse, i.e., withhold consent, future development activities that will affect their lands, livelihoods, and heritage. The omission of "consent" further implies that the state's obligation is only limited to informing and perhaps listening to what communities have to say, but that it is ultimately free to do as it pleases—irrespective of what Maya communities decide. This reverses a host of key advances Indigenous people have made across the international sector with respect to asserting that consent (not merely consultation) remains central to decisions related to development projects (Barelli, 2012; Wright & Tomaselli, 2019).

Evidence of the government's revision to FPIC was obvious, patronizing, and debatably, blunderous. For example, in an "information campaign" with Maya communities in Toledo District related to "developing"

southern Belize, the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs explicitly told villagers that FPIC literally means "Free, Prior, and Informed *Consultation*," which contravenes the internationally accepted definition of FPIC (Hanna and Vanclay, 2013). Broadly, in the face of the Belizean government's brazen alteration of FPIC and unilateral submission of the newly revised protocol to the CCJ, the MLA-TAA are maintaining that both the collective governance system and right to self-determination of the Maya people in Toledo District have been "once again" violated and attacked via repeated attempts to destabilize the TAA and discredit the alcaldes. In turn, the MLA-TAA rejected the government's protocol outright, as well as condemned the state's redefinition of FPIC. Here, it is necessary to understand what the alcaldes and TAA represent with respect to the wider politics at play vis-à-vis (postcolonial) state power.

## **5. The Toledo Alcaldes Association: An intergenerational Indigenous institution**

The alcaldes, which were established and operational in an Indigenous form prior to Spanish and British contact in the Caribbean, is a system of communal governance rooted in the customary laws of Maya villages and communities. The Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), which is the current expression of the broader alcaldes and the main representative body of the Maya people, is an autonomous association of 78 leaders from the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District. As an Indigenous customary (non-state) governance system in southern Belize, the alcaldes are a cornerstone of Maya social relations, decision-making processes, and culture. Markedly, the TAA is neither an NGO nor a state entity in any form. Rather, the TAA is an Indigenous institution and independent association that collectively represents the alcaldes who serve their respective villages via participatory governance. Given several Maya communities in Toledo District lack either the necessary capital or specialist training to effectively engage in legal negotiations with state administrators, one key function of the TAA has been to attain and provide information to village residents about making informed decisions that will affect their communities and the environs in which they live. In particular, the TAA carefully manages and engages village members on matters related to state-sponsored economic development projects or when private companies are seeking access to Maya lands.

Historically, the ever-evolving system of the alcaldes was comparatively decentralized and far more dynamic than rigid imperialist structures of authority (Mesh, 2017). For example, the alcaldes and contemporary TAA were and remain a localized form of direct democracy, which involves consensus-based discussion and cooperative decision-making processes rooted in pre-Columbian modes of Maya socio-political organizing. While a longstanding Indigenous institution, the alcaldes system has been episodically (re)shaped through its experiences with colonial power and co-optation, as well as contrariwise, via acts of contestation and resuscitation by local Maya communities. The Maya had complex mutable assemblages of governance that were destabilized and weakened because Spanish conquistadors and later British overseers relegated the authority of Indigenous governance down to only local community affairs and village matters.

Despite the appropriation and distortion of the alcaldes by occupying colonial forces, Maya elements of the system including the *batabs* (village leaders), *ah kulels* (mediators), and *a cuch cab* (councils) remain (Mesh, 2017). In short, traditional aspects of the Maya alcaldes were seized, apprehended, and conscripted into colonial administrations by Spanish and British imperialists at different times over the past two centuries, but reclaimed and recuperated by the Maya in what can be viewed as a dialectic between colonialism and resistance. In the present moment, the TAA now constitutes a key pillar and serves as the bedrock of the Maya's intergenerational practice of participatory communal governance. Indeed, as grassroots Maya organizers and communities have asserted, the alcaldes are the "only legitimate Maya governance body that represents the Maya people collectively, with the TAA being the highest arbiter and custodian for Maya customary law" (MLSB, 2019).

## **6. Undermining Indigenous governance and movements**

The Government of Belize's refusal to recognize and engage the TAA as the appellant of the CCJ order—and as an Indigenous institution and critical element of Maya governance—goes well beyond the aforementioned matter of (re)defining FPIC. This is because a major issue related to the revised FPIC

framework is that the TAA has been deliberately deleted and entirely omitted from the new protocol by the state. The initial draft of the FPIC procedure included the TAA as a body that must be notified on any issue requiring the consent of any individual Maya community. This was included in the draft version of the protocol so communities could accompany and support one another collectively. Involving the TAA in every instance in which FPIC is required also ensures that issues which go beyond affecting one distinct community are fully considered. For example, when the impact of a given project disturbs larger ecosystems, forests, or communal lands beyond the flexible parameters of a single village boundary. Instead of agreeing to the legitimacy of the TAA, the state openly refused to recognize the alcaldes and cast suspicion on Maya communal governance across the board by issuing a press release explicitly asserting: "We do not believe that there is such collective governance system of the Maya people."

Further complicating the issue is that the Government of Belize's revised FPIC protocol, in addition to intentionally excluding the TAA, listed a series of formal Maya-constituted NGOs, some of which have been inactive for years, as organizations that could be consulted on matters of FPIC in place of the TAA. Here, it must be reiterated that while some of the NGOs listed in the revised FPIC protocol do indeed continue to serve Maya communities on issues related to conservation and economic development, they are not a part of the Maya traditional governance system. That is, Maya-constituted NGOs are qualitatively and politically different from the TAA and MLA as neither the MLA nor the TAA are NGOs. Given that the TAA, which is an integral part of Maya customary yet evolving processes of democratic and communal decision-making, and MLA, which is an autonomous alliance of past leaders and environmental defenders who serve as community advisors, are being written out of the new protocol and conflated as NGOs by the government there is grave concern that the state is weaponizing the non-profit industrial complex (Thunder Hawk, 2007) to undermine an Indigenous system of governance, to malign grassroots activists, and sabotage an autonomous movement.

In further attempting to justify the omission of the TAA, the Government of Belize, via a limited and liberal-Western appeal to "inclusion," has specified that every individual in a Maya community should be consulted on matters related to FPIC and development projects. At a follow-up press conference in February, the MLA-TAA did not disagree with this point in principle, agreeing that decision-making power ultimately resides with each and every Maya community. Spelling out this stance and placing it in an Indigenous frame, Cristina Coc, spokesperson of the MLA-TAA, explained:

We don't disagree with that (i.e. that every member of a community needs to be a part of the consultation process). This is not something new to us (the Maya). That is the way that we make decisions in our communities. Customarily, the fundamental authority for decision making rests with the village meeting where the members of that community collectively—by way of consensus—make decisions.

The crux of the issue related to ensuring that every resident of a village is included in FPIC protocols thereby remains *the process* through which deliberation and consultation occurs. The state is defining the terms of engagement and demanding the Maya operate and organize on its conditions, while the MLA-TAA is fighting to remain beholden to Indigenous forms of relationality and customary self-governance. This includes sharing information and making decisions collectively in village meetings and communal assemblies called *ab'inks*, which have been and remain the lifeblood of Maya participatory governance, not to mention Maya culture, identity, and heritage. Markedly, the Belizean government has also excised the *ab'ink* from the revised FPIC document and is intentionally trying to remove the communal assemblies from the consultation process.

In responding to the MLA-TAA's contention that Maya systems of governance were being disrespected and disavowed by the actions of the state, Prime Minister John Briceño mobilized a discourse of nationalism via an incendiary rebuttal in early 2022 which implied that the Maya of southern Belize are irrational, selfish, and secessionist by alleging:

I think they [the MLA] will not be happy until we give them over the Toledo District and that's never going to happen under a PUP (People's United Party) government. Toledo is a part of this country and as a government we have a responsibility to this country.<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy that the MLA-TAA both continue to identify as Belizean and have never argued that the Maya of Toledo District desire to be cleaved from the rest of the country or want to renounce any aspect of their "Belizeanness."

## 7. Defending the collective against divide-and-conquer

For the Maya of southern Belize, many of whom continue to argue and defend that they are a *collective* yet heterogenous people, the *ab'ink* is a long-standing and essential part of Indigenous *communal* governance; peace, diplomacy, and boundary harmonization processes; and self-determination that cannot be divorced from their relationship with land and ecosystems (Gahman *et al.*, 2020). The *ab'ink* is a space of gathering and listening anchored in place in which *all* community members and village residents, including alcaldes, come together to make decisions via democratic process, active listening, and deliberative dialogue (MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019). The *ab'ink* engenders reciprocity, interdependency, and is also where information is openly shared and discussed at length amongst community members.

With respect to the FPIC protocol, it remains imperative that the *ab'ink*, as well as TAA-MLA, be formally included in the process. This is because the TAA-MLA afford community members specialist knowledge on cultural protocols and village affairs, as well as technical expertise and legal advice on the specificities of FPIC. Likewise and legally, including the TAA-MLA is mandated by the CCJ order given each were representatives of the Maya communities and appellants in the 2015 court victory. Even more significantly, as an Indigenous institution, the TAA is an expression of Maya political agency and self-determination that is vital to recognize, because communities who are on the front lines of environmental defense across the globe must constantly find ways to build solidarity and maintain cohesion to avoid being splintered into smaller bodies. The fragmentation of communities and alienation of village residents from one another are well-documented force multipliers of exploitation and harm that is perpetrated by states and corporate extractors (Fent and Kojola, 2020; Tran *et al.*, 2020).

To clarify, individually engaging every single community member from every village that will be affected by any given project *separate* from the community, in addition to arguably being logistically impossible, bypasses the *ab'ink* and governance process through which Maya communities arrive at consensus. Indeed, individual discussions held in isolation and the solicitation of sole opinions outside of communal processes are not the same as discussing issues together in community assemblies (*ab'inks*). Moreover, the *ab'ink*, which is a central and indelible aspect of customary Maya governance, is by its very nature inclusive, democratic, and consensual, not to mention emblematic of the Maya's historical tradition and practice of collectivity, rootedness, and relationality. For the Maya, participating in and contributing to an *ab'ink* (i.e., customary governance) is inextricably linked to territory and ecosystems. In turn, eschewing communal processes, especially on matters related to FPIC, notoriously fractures communities, facilitates misinformation, and hinders Indigenous people's autonomy (Asher, 2020). For the TAA-MLA, the recent actions of the Government of Belize are a premeditated attempt to fetter the Maya's right to self-determination, are a prelude to further land dispossession, and take a page straight out of the colonial "divide and conquer" playbook.

Put simply, the Belizean government's insistence that the Maya adhere to its liberal framing of "inclusion" and abide by the state's dictates regarding community outreach, deliberation, and consent is a blatant repudiation of Indigenous governance and an act of repression. As numerous Maya movement activists and alcaldes have expressed since the Government of Belize's unilateral filing of the FPIC protocol, this entire scenario is an all too familiar reminder of the enduring and inherent authoritarianism, corruption, and violence

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVWZzWn3apM>



of the Westminster-modelled state, which continues give rise to devastating consequences across the Commonwealth and the Caribbean (Vernon, 2013).

Amidst escalating tensions and an intensifying war of words, Cristina Coc, an Indigenous Q'eqchi' land defender who was arrested and criminalized by the Belizean government in 2015 along with 12 other Maya activists yet later had all charges dropped, did not back down and summarized the dynamics and structural violence at hand by asserting:

I just want to make it clear that despite the appearance, or what the perception out there might be, it is very clear that this government is attempting to remove and erase the traditional governance institution of the Maya people, which is dangerous and damaging...

This a concerted effort to plant seeds of division among our people and to break up the collective institution that provides the strength and the unity that has carried this movement for 30 long years. ...Enough is enough.

## 8. Critical reflection and key takeaways

In collectively reflecting upon the incendiary FPIC clash detailed throughout this article and broader global environmental politics at hand, we summarize five key takeaways for readers and researchers in the field of political ecology. **Firstly**, Indigenous self-determination and practices of collective governance—as well as approaches to peace, diplomacy, boundaries, and relationships with ecosystems—precede colonial contact. Indeed, all have been alive for generations on end, and carry on across a wide array of differing geographies. These ever-evolving participatory forms of governance and relationships with nature continue to be adversely influenced, affected, or denied by differing (post)colonial institutions and state authorities across the Global South and North and all throughout the Majority and Minority World. Nevertheless, in Toledo District of southern Belize, an Indigenous system of community-based governance remains; the *alcaldes*, which has the TAA as its representative body and is a direct product of consensus, democratic process, and of Maya communities' political agency and relationship with territory.

**Secondly**, states across Central America and the Caribbean like Belize frequently mobilize discourses of economic development, nationalism, and empowerment to fracture and debilitate Indigenous communities (Navas, Mingorria & Aguilar-González, 2018). In this case, the Government of Belize is deploying appeals to nationalism to frame the Maya as recalcitrant and irrational, as a means to pit the wider Belizean population and civil society against them. Government administrators are also using liberal conceptions of "inclusion" and "authenticity" to discredit and disrupt Indigenous forms of communal governance (e.g. the TAA), organizing, and solidarity. This strips rural Maya communities of their agency and is a foreclosure of self-determination. Consequently, isolated Maya villages can more easily be subjected to misinformation, manipulation, coercion, intimidation, and pressure to acquiesce or accept state-sponsored development projects and actions that might negatively affect Maya people, culture, and the environment at large. This is as discomfiting as it is threatening given the Belizean government has a well-documented history of expropriating land and damaging ecosystems, i.e., both structural and slow violence.

**Thirdly**, the historical-ongoing tactics, strategies, and policies of contrasting empires and colonial administrators have been to deliberately divide Indigenous communities and sow seeds of internal discord. These splintering processes continue in the contemporary moment in Belize, albeit in a different postcolonial form. This is evidenced by the state-sanctioned dispossession of Indigenous lands and nationalism exhibited by the Belizean government. On this point, it is well worth remembering that the Government of Belize is a hierarchical institution of concentrated power that was imposed by the British Empire and is based upon the Westminster model. Meaning, formal governance in Belize is just one indicator of how deeply embedded and entrenched colonial institutions, worldviews, and class relations remain across the Anglo-Caribbean and Commonwealth.

**Fourthly**, international and domestic NGOs, even if well intentioned and doing "good" work related to conservation, sustainability, or empowerment with local communities, are not necessarily beholden to

Indigenous worldviews and forms of governance (Gahman and Thongs, 2020). Moreover, NGOs frequently blunt radical praxis, reproduce neoliberal hegemony, and often are either complicit with, or immediate beneficiaries of, the privatization and dispossession of the commons. These dynamics and tendencies undermine processes related to established yet variable forms of participatory communal systems of Indigenous governance, not to mention interfering with grassroots resistance and the efforts of autonomous movements. In addition, there are disheartening and regrettable instances in which Indigenous community members themselves fall prey to the trappings of *protagonismo* (i.e., egoist individualism) (Stone, 2019) and end up working for or representing the interests of the state and/or private capital. This is a dilemma that no demographic group concerned with self-determination or sustaining the planet is immune to, whatever their identity or geography.

**Lastly**, Indigenous communities are neither uniform nor monolithic. They are characterized by diversity with respect to individual ambitions, cultural values, customary practices, political ideals, spiritual beliefs, relationships with the environment, and day-to-day opinions across the board. At times, select members of communities may side with the aims and agendas of the state or interests and initiatives of corporate extractors and big businesses. Similarly, some may even accept roles as paid representatives of governments or corporations that are engaged in the enclosure, expropriation, and alienation of Indigenous lands and territories. Indeed, as this conflict in Belize demonstrates all too clearly, while the complexions of postcolonial governments and faces of bourgeois institutions may change, the authoritarianism of the state, the aggression of "development", and the repression of Indigenous ways of being remain. Even so and equally, Maya grassroots environmental defenders in Toledo District are continuing to fight for their relationships with territory and customary system of governance in the face of the enduring legacies of colonialism, driving forces of capitalist accumulation, and violence of disavowal—come what may.

## Funding Statement

This research is supported by the Heritage, Dignity and Violence Programme of the British Academy, Award ID HDV190078, under the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund.

## References

- Acosta, A. (2013). Extractivism and neoextractivism: Two sides of the same curse. In M. Lang & D. Mokrani (Eds.) *Beyond development: Alternative visions from Latin America*, (pp. 61-86). Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Transnational Institute.
- Anaya, S. J. & Puig, S. (2017). Mitigating state sovereignty: The duty to consult with indigenous peoples. *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 67(4), 435-464. <https://doi.org/10.3138/utlj.67.1>
- Apaydin, V. (2020). *Critical perspectives on cultural memory and heritage: Construction, transformation, and destruction*. UCL Press.
- Asher, K. (2020). *Fragmented forests, fractured lives: Ethno-territorial struggles and development in the Pacific Lowlands of Colombia*. *Antipode*, 52(4), 949-970. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12470>
- Awasis, S. (2020). "Anishinaabe time": Temporalities and impact assessment in pipeline reviews. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 27(1), 830-852. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23236>
- Barandiarán, J., & Walsh, C. (2017). Production/destruction in Latin America. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24(1), 716-725. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20962>
- Barelli, M. (2012). Free, prior, and informed consent in the aftermath of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Developments and challenges ahead. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 16(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.597746>
- Batterbury, S. P. J. (2015). Doing political ecology inside and outside the academy. In Bryant R. L. (Ed.) *The International handbook of political ecology*. (pp. 27-43). Edward Elgar.
- Berman-Arévalo, E. & Ojeda, D. (2020). Ordinary geographies: Care, violence, and agrarian extractivism in "post-conflict" Colombia. *Antipode*, 52(6), 1583-1602. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12667>

- Cavanagh, C. J. & Benjaminsen, T. A. (2017). Political ecology, variegated green economies, and the foreclosure of alternative sustainabilities. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24(1), 200-216. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20800>
- Chattopadhyay, S. (2019). Infiltrating the academy through (anarcha-)ecofeminist pedagogies. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30(1), 31-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2019.1574846>
- Cielo, C., & Coba, L. (2018). Extractivism, gender, and disease: An intersectional approach to inequalities. *Ethics and International Affairs*, 32(2), 169-178. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000291>
- de Leeuw, S. & Hunt, S. (2018). Unsettling decolonizing geographies. *Geography Compass*, 12(7), e12376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12376>
- Doyle, C. M. (2014). *Indigenous peoples, title to territory, rights and resources: The transformative role of free, prior, and informed consent*. Routledge.
- Dunlap, A. (2018). A bureaucratic trap: Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and wind energy development in Juchitán, Mexico. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 29(4), 88-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1334219>
- ELZN. (2016). *Critical thought in the face of the Capitalist Hydra I: Contributions by the Sixth Commission of the EZLN*. Paperboat.
- Estes, N. (2019). *Our history is the future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the long tradition of indigenous resistance*. Verso.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.
- Fent, A., & Kojola, E. (2020). Political ecologies of time and temporality in resource extraction. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 27(1), 819-829. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23252>
- Freire, P. (1985). [Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire](#). *Language Arts*, 62(1), 15-21.
- Gahman, L. (2020). Contra plantation, prison, and capitalist annihilation: collective struggle, social reproduction, and the co-creation of lifegiving worlds. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(3), 503-524. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1572606>
- Gahman, L., Greenidge, A. & Mohamed, A. (2020). Plunder via violation of FPIC: Land grabbing, state negligence, and pathways to peace in Central America and the Caribbean. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 15(3), 372-376. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1542316620951278>
- Gahman, L., Penados, F., Greenidge, A. & The JCS Youth Team. (2020). [Dignity, dreaming, and desire-based research in the cace of slow violence: Community mobilising as \(counter\)development](#). *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 12(1), 1-33.
- Gahman, L., & Thongs, G. (2020). Development justice, a proposal: Reckoning with disaster, catastrophe, and climate change in the Caribbean. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(4), 763-778. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12369>
- Gahman, L., Thongs, G., & Greenidge, A. (2021). Disaster, debt, and "underdevelopment": The cunning of colonial-capitalism in the Caribbean. *Development*, 64(1-2), 112-118. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00282-4>
- Girvan, N. (2015). Assessing Westminster in the Caribbean: Then and now. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 53(1), 95-107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2014.993162>
- Gomathy, K. N. (2022). Symmetrical, non-sovereign cartography as a means for conservation: Insights from a participatory forest mapping exercise. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 29(1), 93-100. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2371>
- Grandia, L. (2012). *Enclosed: Conservation, cattle, and commerce among the Q'eqchi' Maya lowlanders*. University of Washington Press.

- Hanna, P., & Vanclay, F. (2013). Human rights, Indigenous peoples and the concept of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 31(2), 146-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2013.780373>
- Hernández Reyes, C. E. (2019). Black women's struggles against extractivism, land dispossession, and marginalization in Colombia. *Latin American Perspectives*, 46(2), 217-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0094582X19828758>
- Heynen, N. (2018). [Toward an abolition ecology](#). *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics*, 1, 240-247.
- Iborra-Mallent, J. V., & Palmer, K. (2021). Canadian imperialism and the forced displacement of the Garifuna communities of Honduras. *Nómadas*, 54, 49-65. <https://dx.doi.org/10.30578/nomadas.n54a3>
- Kapoor, D., & Jordan, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Research, political engagement and dispossession: Indigenous, peasant and urban poor activism in the Americas and Asia*. Bloomsbury.
- Kirkness, V. J., & R. Barnhardt. (1991). [First Nations and higher education: The Four R's-respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility](#). *Journal of American Indian Education* 30(3), 1-15.
- Konforti, L. (2021). The moral economy of defence of territory and the political economy of extractivism in the Polochic valley, Guatemala. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12481>
- Krause, T. (2020). Reducing deforestation in Colombia while building peace and pursuing business as usual extractivism? *Journal of Political Ecology*, 27(1), 401-418. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23186>
- Larsen, S. C. (2016). Regions of care: a political ecology of reciprocal materialities. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 23(1), 159-166. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v23i1.20187>
- Leifsen, E., Gustafsson, M. T., Guzmán-Gallegos, M. A., & Schilling-Vacaflor, A. (2017). New mechanisms of participation in extractive governance: between technologies of governance and resistance work. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(5), 1043-1057. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1302329>
- Leydet, D. (2019). The power to consent: Indigenous peoples, states, and development projects. *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 69(3), 371-403. <https://doi.org/10.3138/utlj.2018-0068>
- Liboiron, M. (2021). Decolonizing geoscience requires more than equity and inclusion. *Nature Geoscience*, 14(12), 876-877. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-021-00861-7>
- Locret-Collet, M., Springer, S., Mateer, J., & Acker, M. (Eds.) (2021). *Inhabiting the earth: Anarchist political ecology for landscapes of emancipation*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- McCarty, T. L., & Coronel-Molina, S. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Indigenous language revitalization in the Americas*. Routledge.
- Méndez, M. J. (2018). "The river told me": Rethinking intersectionality from the world of Berta Cáceres. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 29(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1421981>
- Menton, M., & Le Billon, P. (Eds.). (2021). *Environmental defenders: Deadly struggles for life and territory*. Routledge.
- Mesh, T. (2017). [Alcaldes of Toledo, Belize: Their genealogy, contestation, and aspirations](#). PhD Dissertation. University of Florida.
- MLA-TAA- JCS (2019). *The future we dream*. Maya Leaders Alliance-Toledo Alcaldes Association-Julian Cho Society. <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/asset/10297/the-future-we-dream-report.pdf>
- MLSB (Maya Leaders of Southern Belize). (2019). Maya Leaders of Southern Belize Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/mayaleadersofsouthernbelize/posts/the-toledo-alcaldes-association-taa-is-the-highest-arbiter-and-custodian-for-may/458711214314993/>.
- Miss, S., Kus, R., Penados, F., & Gahman, L. (2021). Joy against the machine, building better futures. *Peace Review*, 33(1), 140-148, doi:10.1080/10402659.2021.1956147
- Mollett, S. (2016). The power to plunder: Rethinking land grabbing in Latin America. *Antipode*, 48(2), 412-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12190>
- Muñoz, E. E., & Villarreal, M. D. C. (2019). [Women's struggles against extractivism in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). *Contexto Internacional*, 41, 303-325.

- Navas, G., Mingorria, S., & Aguilar-González, B. (2018). Violence in environmental conflicts: The need for a multidimensional approach. *Sustainability Science*, 13(3), 649-660. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0551-8>
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
- Ødegaard, C. V. & Rivera Andía, J. J. (2019) *Indigenous life projects and extractivism: Ethnographies from South America*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Penados, F. (2018). Indigenous governance and education in Belize: Lessons from the Maya land rights struggle and Indigenous education initiatives. In McKinley, E.A. & Smith, L.T. (Eds.), *Handbook of Indigenous education*. (pp. 207–228). Springer Nature.
- Penados, F., Gahman, L., & Smith, S.-J. (2022). Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean. *Geoforum*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.07.004>
- Pitts, A. K., Trost, B., Trost, N., Hand, B., & Margulies, J. (2022). Learning with the seed bomb: On a classroom encounter with abolition ecology. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 29(1), 202-208. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.4715>
- Raftopoulos, M. (2017). Contemporary debates on social-environmental conflicts, extractivism and human rights in Latin America. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 21(4), 387-404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1301035>
- Rius, M.B., Icaza, M.G.A., & Márquez, I. G. (2011). Indigenous women in defence of life and land: An introduction. *Development*, 54(4), 470-472. <https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2011.92>
- Robbins, P. (2015). The trickster science. In Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of political ecology* (pp. 89-101). Routledge
- Schilling-Vacaflor, A. & Flemmer, R. (2020). Mobilising free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from below: A typology of indigenous peoples' agency. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 27(2), 291-313. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02702008>
- Scoones, I., Edelman, M., Borrás Jr, S.M., Hall, R., Wolford, W., & White, B. (2018). Emancipatory rural politics: Confronting authoritarian populism. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1339693>
- Shoman, A. (2011). *A history of Belize in thirteen chapters*. The Angelus Press Limited.
- Simpson, L.B. (2016). Indigenous resurgence and co-resistance. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2(2), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019>
- Simpson L. B. & Coulthard G. (2014). [On Dechinta Bush University, Indigenous land-based education and embodied resurgence](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2014.944444). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*. 3(3), 67-85.
- Smith, C. (2021). From colonial forestry to community-based fire management: The political ecology of fire in Belize's coastal savannas, 1920 to present. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 28(1), 577-606. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.2989>
- Smith, S.-J., Penados, F., & Gahman, L. (2021). Desire over damage: Epistemological shifts and anticolonial praxis from an Indigenous-led community health project. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13410>
- Stone, L. K. (2019). *Compañeros and protagonismo*: The ethics of anti-neoliberal activism and the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (FPDT) of Atenco, Mexico. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 24(3), 709-726. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12415>
- Sultana, F. (2021). Political ecology I: From margins to center. *Progress in Human Geography*, 45(1), 156-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0309132520936751>
- Thunder Hawk, M. (2007). Native organizing before the nonprofit industrial complex. In INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence (Ed.) *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex*. (pp. 101-106). South End Press.

- Tomlinson, K. (2019). Indigenous rights and extractive resource projects: Negotiations over the policy and implementation of FPIC. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23(5), 880-897. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1314648>
- Tran, D., Martinez-Alier, J., Navas, G., & Mingorria, S. (2020). Gendered geographies of violence: A multiple case study analysis of murdered women environmental defenders. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 27(1), 1189-1212. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23760>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K.W. (2012). [Decolonization is not a metaphor](#). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1(1), 1-40.
- Vernon, D.G. (2013). [Big game, small town: Clientelism and democracy in the modern politics of Belize \(1954 to 2011\)](#). PhD dissertation. University College London.
- Wainwright, J. (2008). *Decolonizing development: Colonial power and the Maya*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wainwright, J. (2021). The Maya and the Belizean state: 1997-2004. *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 17(3), 320-349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2021.1935694>
- Wright, C., & Tomaselli, A. (Eds.) (2019). *The prior consultation of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: Inside the implementation gap*. Routledge.
- Youdelis, M., Townsend, J., Bhattacharyya, J., Moola, F., & Fobister, J. B. (2021). Decolonial conservation: Establishing Indigenous protected areas for future generations in the face of extractive capitalism. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 28(1), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.4716>