**Research Report to CLAG: *Saneamiento for Whom? Adjudicating Space and Rights in Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, Nicaragua***

**Overview**

My research project investigates the premises of *saneamiento*, the reportedly last phase of indigenous land titling in Nicaragua’s Bosawas Biosphere Reserve. While intended to be an issue of cadastral regularization conducted by the state, *saneamiento* in practice (aka “*autosaneamiento*”) is serving to ‘cleanse’ non-indigenous mestizos from indigenous lands. The violence of this process has been highlighted by recent developments just east of Bosawas. News reports have generally been sympathetic, seeing *saneamiento* as a necessary step towards indigenous autonomy and self-government in the context of an equivocating state. However, my work is intended to explore the difficult questions that *saneamiento* raises: issues related to indigeneity, the indigenous-mestizo binary, and social justice. Moreover, drawing on political ecology, I hypothesize that the exclusion of mestizos, which is often justified by environmental conservation goals and indigenous land use rights, may paradoxically exacerbate conflicts over natural resources and territory, if the underlying causes of the colonization of indigenous lands by poor mestizo peasants are not addressed.

To better understand the premises and logics behind *saneamiento*, I conducted preliminary fieldwork in Nicaragua this summer (July 7th – August 18th, 2015). The James J. Parsons Ph.D. Award granted by the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers played an instrumental role in financing this work. The research funds were used to purchase a return air ticket between the United States and Nicaragua. Furthermore, the award helped cover lodging and food-related expenses.

**Description of Activities**

I spent 6 weeks in the capital of Nicaragua, Managua, conducting semi-structured and in-depth interviews with policy makers, NGOs and international organizations. While I had originally planned that I would also start interviews with mestizo and indigenous groups already during this first fieldwork period, I quickly learned that due to the complexity of the issue and the limited amount of time, it would first be important to gain insight into the political premises of *saneamiento* and its implementation – or lack thereof – at the national level. Thus, I decided to concentrate my efforts during this first research trip on interviewing key informants in Managua, and save a more in-depth analysis of implications of *saneamiento* and marginalization at the local level for the second phase of my research.

Making use of the contacts I acquired while working in Nicaragua between 2012 and 2014, I managed to arrange interviews with officials in different ministries and government bodies, including the Secretariat for Indigenous Affairs of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (SAIA-MINREX), the Ministry for Natural Resources and Environment (MARENA) and the National Forest Institute (INAFOR). I also interviewed representatives of international organizations, such as agencies of the United Nations, international cooperation agencies, and experts in issues related to indigenous territories.

In addition, I collected documents and studies related to *saneamiento* and indigenous land titling in different governmental offices. I also participated in a workshop organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations on incentives for participatory forest management. This workshop deepened my understanding of who is considered as a legitimate stakeholder on indigenous territories, and it also served as a platform for networking and identifying additional interviewees.

**Research findings and next steps**

From the beginning of the research process, it was clear that *saneamiento* is an extremely complex issue; even more so than I had initially thought. This was brought to my attention by almost all of the interviewees, who emphasized the political and economic obstacles and complexity of the process. Secondly, although *saneamiento* is an integral part of different conservation strategies of both governmental and non-governmental actors, it became obvious that its implementation is far from being completed. Furthermore, many of the interviewees, especially outside the government, were doubtful about the government’s intentions to actually implement *saneamiento*; it was stated that there is no political will to carry out the process, although it was deemed necessary and in fact codified in law. The ambiguity related to the implementation of *saneamiento* was evident in the interviews I conducted with the representatives of the government – while all the instances recognized the need to implement *saneamiento*, nobody seemed to be clear about who actually is in charge for putting it into practice, and they were reluctant to assume the responsibility. Similarly, while *saneamiento* is currently a component of international conservation projects such as REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation), international organizations and representatives of international cooperation agencies generally stated that *saneamiento* is too political an issue for them to implement.

The interviews thus raised questions about the motivations behind this reluctance to carry out *saneamiento* despite the current discourse strongly supporting the process. It is likely that the slowness and failure to establish clear guidelines will exacerbate the negative social justice outcomes even more, for both indigenous and mestizo groups. As a result of the lack of action, indigenous peoples, who have been given false expectations, have become frustrated and have started to implement activities of “*autosaneamiento*” without assistance or support from the government. In the process, they physically evict mestizos from their land. This inevitably leads to conflicts, the impacts of which are devastating on both sides.

These conflicts have recently escalated in Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast, and there have been reports on deadly confrontations between indigenous people and colonists both in national and international media[[1]](#footnote-1). At the same time, the views on the mestizo “invaders” remain simplistic, and as one of my interviewees pointed out, it would be important to unpack mestizos as a heterogeneous category, something that merits more research. This is one of the aspects that I wish to address during my next fieldwork period.

In sum, this first fieldwork period laid a solid foundation for follow-up research to be carried out starting in summer 2016, and thus fulfilled my objectives. It significantly enhanced my understanding of *saneamiento* and further solidified my working hypothesis. Moreover, this preliminary work provided additional insights into the topic, one of the most important of which is the slowness of the government to implement *saneamiento*, and the implications of this. As for the drivers of mestizo migration to the agricultural frontier in Bosawas, I found out that there are powerful actors that may use poor mestizo peasants as an instrument to gain access to yet new areas of indigenous territories in Bosawas. These uneven power relations may, to a certain extent, also explain why the government has thus far been unenthusiastic to carry out *saneamiento*. These ideas evoked some new questions that I wish to ask during the next phase of my fieldwork. These include the following: Why is the government hesitant to put *saneamiento* into practice? What are the political-economic obstacles to the implementation process? What is the role of large *terratenientes*, landholders*,* in the colonization of Bosawas and the lack of implementation of *saneamiento*?

1. See e.g. Felix, E. & Galeano, L.M. AP Photos: ”Deadly Nicaragua land conflict displaces hundreds.” Washington Post, Sept. 30, 2015. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\_americas/ap-photos-deadly-nicaragua-land-conflict-displaces-hundreds/2015/09/30/99d69b82-6728-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205\_story.html>; Artola, G.A. ”Crece conflicto entre miskitos y colonos.” El Nuevo Diario, Sept. 7, 2015. Available at: <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/369744-crece-conflicto-miskitos-colonos/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)