

Interview with Manolo Miranda of Movimiento 10 de Abril, Ngäbe-Buglé district, Panama

Background: In 2011, the Dutch development bank FMO started financing the Barro Blanco hydroelectric project, situated in the territory of the Indigenous Ngäbe-Bugle people. The dam, which was built without the consent of the local community by the Panamanian company GENISA, has caused controversy since its very beginning. In 2012, peaceful protests the project faced crackdown by the military, leaving 2 dead, 40 injured, and over 100 arrests. M10, the local movement that advocates for the rights of the affected communities, has always warned the banks of the negative impacts of the project. It did so in vain: in 2016 the reservoir of the dam was filled, and the dam went into operation, endangering the livelihoods of the local communities.

In April 2021 FMO announced that its involvement with the Barro Blanco project has ended because GENISA has prepaid its loan. M10 currently has a standing complaint with the independent complaint mechanism and was preparing a second complaint. The second complaint will no longer be considered. Nick Middeldorp of Both ENDS spoke with Manolo Miranda of M10 to learn about his expectations about the impending visit of the complaint mechanism, and M10's call to FMO for a responsible exit.

Nick: *What is M10's history: how was it created, and why did you join the movement?*

Manolo: Movimiento 10 de abril began in the year 1999, which is when they tried to construct the first dam of 74 megawatts, in this area. So M10 is an organization founded on that date, the 10th of April 1999, that struggles for the rights of the affected people, and to protect the natural resources. In that time, I was an adolescent. During Mireya Moscoso's government we succeeded: the Court suspended the project because it would violate constitutional norms. From 2011 onwards, we retook the initiative to resist the new dam. We learnt that the Dutch and German banks, FMO and DEG, are financing the project. And we learnt that these banks have a policy related to human rights. For us it was very important to communicate with the bank, to present our community's worries that our human rights would be violated, and our environmental, social, economic, and religious rights. But this time we could not stop the company GENISA. Because the Panamanian government said that we needed international investment.

Nick: *How many people and how many communities are represented by M10?*

Manolo: M10 represents five directly affected communities: Quebrado Plata, Quebrada Caña, Kiad, Palomar, and the mixed Indigenous and peasant community of Calabasito. That is who we as M10 are representing.

Nick: *Why did you choose to defend the river?*

Manolo: Our ancestors lived in this area. Tabasará was the chieftain who dominated almost entire Panama, and he lived in this area. In this area the petroglyph was written that stands for capacity and knowledge. Now it is under the lake. Therefore, for us this is an important river. Also, it is a river with a wealth of numerous aquatic species. That was the importance of the river. Losing this was very difficult for the community.

Nick: *You mentioned petroglyphs? (rock carvings – ed.) What importance does it have, and what happened with the petroglyphs in the end?*

Manolo: Well, the petroglyph that is here in the area stands flooded beneath the reservoir of the dam. Below the lake. It is a petroglyph that describes the history of the existence of our ancestors. It is also recorded there how many wisemen ascended to Chieftain. Our history is written there since – since the millennial times that we have been living here. Look, it affected us in a spiritual way: it is where we carried out our venerations, where we remembered our children about the existence of our ancestors and the history that they left written. Now the community cannot visit anymore. Some people of this area visited permanently, and others who are not from this community would make a yearly trip. This would bring some profit to the population, through the sales of products, but now it cannot be done anymore.

And the children, who are now adolescents, ask us “when are we going to see the petroglyphs, when are we going to do this that I used to see?”. It is difficult for us to answer that question. It hurts, it hurts because that was our culture: the part of our history, of our ancestors, here in the Tabasará river. Can you imagine, the Chieftain Tabasará had communications with the Miskito Chieftain, all the way in Nicaragua! Here we have a history that is very important. This impact has been, sincerely, absurd for the community. The company and the government told us that “the reservoir can be lowered, for the community to be able to realize its activities”. Has this all been a lie? They deceived the community.

Nick: *What is the current state of the Barro Blanco dam? Has it finished construction, is it operating?*

Manolo: In August 2016 the dam entered in service. From that point on it began selling energy. We still had species [of fish] in the year 2018. It was a huge mortality of fishes, a great number of fish species disappeared. Now we have tilapia in the area. Every day, the tilapia population grows, and other populations are shrinking. It is causing that the community does not have an adequate diet anymore. Tilapia is not a native fish, the company introduced it without notifying anyone that it would be introduced in the reservoir. The other problem lies with the reservoir itself: it has the dynamic of raising and lowering the water level. And oftentimes we find ourselves with sediment problems. And it comes with all types of dirt, all kinds of dead animals, right here in the community of Kiad. Affecting us with this smell of decay.

Nick: *If we compare the before and after, what have been the changes in the lives of the people and the families that live close to the dam?*

Manolo: The first thing that changed: the children cannot bathe in this water. We already had three cases where the children were close to drowning. The parents cannot leave their child alone there. And it is still water that causes allergies that we had to treat with both botanical medicine and medicine we brought from the outside. This has changed the lives of the populations living near the dam. Also, economic life: many people dedicated themselves to selling different species [of fish]. Nobody can do this anymore. On the other hand: the flat lands, which are the most fertile, productive lands, are the lands that were lost. A banana does not grow like it did in those flat lands. There have been various social impacts: the communities lived connected; people visited each other. Nowadays, to go from one

community to the other you must make a lot of turns, cross the hill, to get there. Or take a boat and take hours to arrive, or take a fast [motorized] boat, but pay a fee. There are other changes, for example the animal's habitat: before you could spot rabbits on the side of the river, different kinds of animals, even deer. So, the changes have been very unwanted and heavy for the community.

We remember that mister --- of the bank told us: "but, you have to get used to living with what's negative". This is an offense for us. The community cannot forget the words that mister ---- used in one of the visits that he made. It is a strong offense; this has been remembered by the communities. There was land, and you could farm, and the future generations could farm. How are the future generations going to live now that economic life is more difficult every day? We do not have lands anymore. Different families have had to enter private property, others had to enter the belongings of their own family. But you know, one person is the owner. You may be family, but that does not mean the other will share it. Over 6 hectares of land – we are talking about a good number of flat lands - have been left underwater. And this has created a new conflict, between the communities. Those are some of the problems that we are experiencing in the community right now.

Nick: *And the people were paid a fee for their lands?*

Manolo: what applied to us was a norm that in Panama we call the cadastral norm. And the cadastral price of the land is 2 cents per square meter. Two cents per square meter. So, if, if you had 1,000 square meters, what money are you going to receive? This is no negotiation; this is economic suicide.

Nick: *Do the communities receive electricity? Or what is done with the electricity that is generated?*

Manolo: Not a single community is receiving the energy that is being generated with the Barro Blanco hydroelectric plant. The energy is directly connected to the national, and international network and put to sale. It is not something that will benefit, now and in the future, the community. It is not even in the dreams of the company or the government, that the community will also have a use of this asset that nature is giving to our country.

Nick: *What hopes do you have of the visit of the complaint mechanism?*

Manolo: We in the community expect a great deal from the visit of the mechanism of the banks, to say what has happened when the dam was built. What is happening and how we are seeing the situation right now. Because here [in Panama] they are denying many of the impacts that the community is suffering. To tell the independent panel, and the banks, that we are human beings too.

Nick: *You were preparing a second complaint. What is the second complaint about and what will happened to it now?*

Manolo: we cannot speculate what would have happened with the second complaint. The bank wants direct communication with us. We do not know if this is to comply with the community's demand, because the second complaint had to do with the environmental and economic damage that was caused. Because the community is struggling.

Nick: *What do you consider to be a responsible exit of the banks?*

Manolo: We learnt that the company GENISA is trying to get away from its debt with the bank through another private company – not the one that created the conflict. That company did not create a human rights violation, a violation to our social, cultural, economic, and environmental rights. So, we have asked the bank to please think of its responsibility. We want the bank to sit down. If it really has this policy of respect for human rights, let us put things on the table.

Here we do not need a short-term economic compensation. If a company benefits from juridical security, where is the human security for the people? The juridical security of the human being should carry more weight than the juridical security of a company. We have to know what will happen with the juridical security of our population's social, economic, cultural and spiritual rights. If this dam had not been here, we would have the species [of fish] to live another 50 years, 100 years, 200 years, 300 years ahead of our generation. We already lost this service that nature offered us. We lived of her [nature], that's where our community's subsistence came from.

Let us say the company tells us: take 5,000 dollars. But right now, with the cost of life in Panama 5,000 dollars is not any money. Of those 5,000 dollars, how will your family live for another 50 years, and the next 50 years? How does receiving a crumb help us when we are suffering from hunger, will that solve the problem? Therefore, we have said: we want a permanent solution.

For us, this would be a healthy and stable answer to provide a solution to everything. We were not able to cancel the concession of the company GENISA, because it would make a profit of millions of dollars. What is left for the community? The government does not want to give any assistance to the victims. It is not listening to the community. Nor the banks, nor the company, nor the government have done anything at all to search for a solution to this problem. What they did do: cause a negative impact for the communities. Right now, there are people in the community, that do not have what to eat. Because of what? Because they lost the farmlands that they had next to the Tabasará river. Now they do not have anything to eat. So, we do not consider a momentary compensation to be a way of resolving a social problem. We are in a different century now: you cannot trick us anymore. That is where we want [the banks] to take responsibility for all these negative impacts they caused: that they compensate us permanently. Because basically we have given up our resources to be able to generate that energy.

Nick: *And the bank should admit that it made a mistake when financing this project?*

Manolo: It would also be important for us that bank tells the Panamanian public, and to the world, "we recognize that M10 did not struggle because it is a terrorist organization like GENISA claimed, but that it struggled because their rights were being violated". GENISA considered M10 a terrorist organization. And despite this, FMO financed the project. If they call you a murderer, without you being a murderer, how will you feel? That is why it was not easy for the community to say, "let's negotiate". M10 is not Manolo Miranda or its president, M10 is every person who is directly or indirectly affected. The bank should apologize for all that. They should say "we ask for forgiveness to the community to whom

we caused damage, but we are committed to permanently repair this". They should say this publicly. That would be an exemplary exit of the bank.

Nick: *What can we, as Dutch organizations Both ENDS and SOMO, mean for M10, right now and in the future?*

Manolo: For us, the Dutch organizations SOMO and Both EDNS are organizations that could help us in accompanying our demand. We as a community will not stop suffering whilst justice is not served. And I believe that, you as Dutch organizations are some of the main witnesses of how our human rights as a community have been violated.