

San Pablo de Amali the struggle between human rights and sustainable development.

By Radhika Joshi

In the dialogue between human rights and sustainable development, it is often said that these two concepts go hand in hand. Many argue that without the presence of sustainable development, there can be no human rights, and vice versa. However, one situation that challenges this notion is that of San Pablo de Amalí. Located in the province of Bolivar in the center of Ecuador, San Pablo de Amali has suffered countless floods, loss of land, loss of property, and loss of lives in the name of development.

The story of San Pablo de Amali started over ten years ago, with proposals to build the Hidrotambo, a hydroelectric dam on the Dulcepamba River. This private project was supposed to generate 7.6 megawatts of electricity for the surrounding communities by using 90% of the river basin water. From the start, this was a project marred by poor planning, lack of surveys, negligence, and lack of consent of the community. Mainly the negligence of Hidrotambo S.A., the company that began the original construction of the project. The original contractor, COANDES, was unable to carry out the project due to strong opposition from the community of San Pablo de Amali, which led to clashes between COANDES security forces and workers and members of the community. In order to carry on the work, Hidrotambo S.A. then contracted the Cuerpo de Ingenieros del Ejército, which led to many confrontations between the army and the community in the years 2006-2007. 72 communities faced a total of 300 soldiers in this time, wherein 14 leaders were arrested and eventually charged with rebellion. This alone is a strong reflection of the priorities of the Ecuadorian state, wherein a so-called “development project” takes precedent over the rights of citizens trying to protect their land and livelihoods.

In order to understand the strong opposition against the Hidrotambo, we must first understand the Dulcepamba River. This river had held its course for hundreds of years, carving a riverbed full of curves to slow the waters and allow for community building on its banks. The river is also a source of water and food for the communities surrounding it. Building the Hidrotambo shifted the natural course of the river, bringing it dangerously close to the community of San Pablo de Amali, and eventually destroying three lives,

many houses, as well as productive land that once produced cacao, oranges, and bananas. Land that once was safe to live on no longer exists, due to being carried away by the river. Therefore, a project that was supposed to develop a community instead actively destroyed a large part of it.

A person at the helm of this struggle since the beginning is Manuel Trujillo, the president of the community. Over the past ten years, he has had 42 cases lodged against him and been amnestied twice by the National Assembly. On March 19th, 2015, he was left homeless due to heavy rains that caused the river to flood and destroy both his house and the house of his son. More recently, on February 11th and February 12th, 2017, Don Manuel and his family were once again endangered due to heavy rains and flooding. According to Don Manuel, the doors of the dam are often left closed, even in heavy rains, which leads the river to coming as close to 5 meters to his house. It is because of this that every time it rains heavily, he needs to remove all of his belongings from his house to an improvised hut uphill. More often than not, he also needs to sleep there with his family, essentially outside. He asks that the authorities have a little conscience and find some sort of solution for this situation so that his life and his town are not further damaged. This dam is not only damaging infrastructure and land, but also putting many lives in danger. One of Don Manuel's main concerns is that "the river moves from side to side, the river does not have any stability, once they damaged the banks, they put myself and my whole community at risk." (7:44)

Manuela Pacheco, another significant figure in the community of San Pablo de Amali, is concerned about how dependent the community is on the river, and how the dam is damaging not only the land, but also reducing the presence of fish in the river. As the river rises in the winter months, they lose almost 200 meters worth of land that is supposed to be the riverbank. According to Doña Manuela, the community is literally running out of places to go when the floods endanger their lives. As the river rises, it blocks paths to the nearby town of San Jose del Tambo so that accessing it much more difficult. Moreover, many residents of San Pablo de Amali cannot afford to live in San Jose del Tambo, not to mention that this town is also significantly affected by the changes in the river and has lost several houses as well.

This dam that was supposed to advance the communities surrounding it by providing clean energy has instead severely hurt them. Under the guise of development, the Ecuadorian state allowed private companies to build a dam that does not produce electricity, while diverting a river to the point where countless communities are damaged. The case of San Pablo de Amali, the state has failed them in favor of enterprise, and in the name of development, destroyed land and lives.