

IN DEFENCE OF THE LAND

Erika González

- *A documentary project featuring women defenders* •

1. Introduction

The year 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Latin American work *Open Veins of Latin America* and the fifth anniversary of the death of its author, Eduardo Galeano. By way of tribute and with the goal of answering the question “Why is Latin America still bleeding?”, we decided to make a documentary featuring the stories of struggle and resistance of five women from the Latin American region.

“En defensa de la casa grande” (In defence of the land, in English), its temporary title, is a documentary project focused on five women environmental activists who are currently fighting against large extractivist corporations (that are building hydroelectric dams, mega-mining projects and highways in the middle of the jungle) and even their own governments to protect natural resources. The protagonists struggle to preserve their territory and its natural resources in one of the world’s most dangerous regions for activists, especially those who defend land and the environment.¹

In the documentary, the activists will illustrate just how intense their struggles are, as they are forced to face an economic model based on inequality, militarisation, racism and patriarchal culture. As a result, they are exposed to physical and verbal attacks, death threats, criminalisation, sexual abuse, murder attempts and femicide.

Even though our protagonists are only five women, there are hundreds or thousands of women just like them in various regions of the Global South. Although they live in different countries, such as Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Peru, they demonstrate the complexity of the struggle for a same goal: to defend the Earth, natural goods and the

rights of their communities against the pillaging and repression of unlimited corporate extractivism and their own governments.

In the documentary, the five women community leaders report on the illegal strategies that extractivist corporations use to impose themselves on the territories, while shining light on their racist and patriarchal nature. They also present their own strategies to confront them.

Marqueza lives in the Bolivian Amazon; Bertita, in the countryside in Honduras; Isabel, in the Cordillera Central mountain range in Colombia; Carolina, in the overexploited region of Minas Gerais in Brazil, and Máxima, in the Peruvian mountains. Despite the distance between them, they share a common objective: they all lead their community's resistance against the abusive extraction of natural resources from their land.

Matthieu Lietart was the one who had the original idea for this project. After having produced a documentary on corporate lobbying in European institutions, *The Brussels Business*, he wanted to give visibility to and denounce the power and abuses of large corporations and how they are affecting people in the Global South.

As for myself, I coordinated a European NGO network based in Brussels called Grupo Sur, which has become the EU-LAT Advocacy Network. We monitored the impacts of the relations between the European Union and Latin America and denounced how asymmetrical they were and how they were established mainly to satisfy Europe's commercial interests and its hunger for a supply of raw materials.

Based in Brussels and on our experience in our field of action, Matthieu and I noted that 50 years after the publication of Galeano's book, one of his main conclusions is still true today: "Underdevelopment is not a stage on the road to development. Underdevelopment is the historical result of development elsewhere".²

This is why we want to expose in the documentary how the so-called "development" in the North affects people in the South and the health of the planet. We also want to show how important it is to resist and act locally, nationally and globally.

This project aims to raise awareness among citizens globally, as it has the potential to reach a wide audience. It targets decision makers in both Latin America and Europe to push them to adopt policies that do not affect or violate human rights in Latin America. Another goal is to pressure states to participate, promote and, when the time comes, ratify the binding treaty on business and human rights that is currently being negotiated at the UN.³

2 • The project's challenges – the funding issue

When Matthieu invited me to join the project, I saw it as a massive awareness-building tool

that would be of great use to organisations working on human rights. We have been working on this project for a year and a half now. It will be funded mainly by civil society organisations. We are confident that it will have a major impact on the media and in terms of outreach.

Matthieu and I chose to fund the documentary with contributions from NGOs and other civil society organisations because we also want to give visibility to the work that some organisations from the North do to defend natural resources and prevent human rights violations in the South. We want to demonstrate that while the Global North is responsible for the impacts of extractivism in the Latin American region, its civil society also contributes to the search for solutions and the defence of natural goods.

It has not been easy to find funding, but in total, close to 15 organisations, mostly European ones, believe in this project and are co-financing it. This means that they will be able to use the material for their communications and advocacy campaigns. We do not want to co-produce the documentary with a television network, as this would limit the use of the documentary by NGOs and all the rights of use and distribution would go to the television network. By working with “copyleft” rights, we guarantee that the funders can use this material in their different activities without having to ask us for permission or pay for it.

The Covid-19 health crisis caught up with us in the middle of two film shoots, between Brazil and Honduras, and has forced us to take a break. However, now, more than ever, we are convinced of the importance of making the negative impacts of the extractive industry in Latin America widely known. While people are confined to their homes, some governments have taken advantage of the situation to grant concessions and the companies, especially mining corporations, are promoting themselves as economic agents that are essential for reviving economies in the region.

“En defensa de la casa grande” will debut in the fall of 2021. We hope that in addition to the organisations co-producing this documentary, all other organisations working on the same issues – that is, environmental justice, women environmental defenders, alternatives to development, food sovereignty and many others – join the project in its dissemination phase.



Photo: The film shoot with one of the women activists interviewed (Brumadinho, Brazil).



ERIKA GONZÁLEZ – *Colombia*

Érika González has a degree in journalism. Feminist. She worked for five years as the Executive Secretary of the European network of NGOs Grupo Sur, where she was responsible for the implementation of the organisation's advocacy strategy. This network has recently merged to form the EU-LAT Network, which regroups 40 NGOs, European social movements and organisations that promote solidarity between the people of Latin America and Europe.

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