Tearfund Advocacy case study
Campaigning against the Patuca Dam, Honduras

Background
MOPAWI is an NGO that began in 1985, based in La Moskitia region of Honduras, Central America. This is a vast expanse of pristine rain forest with many protected areas. When MOPAWI started work there they discovered that the indigenous people believed that the land they lived on was theirs, when in fact it was classed as national land. This meant that nobody had secure tenure and that anyone could ‘peacefully’ settle on the land and, after some years, claim it as their own. Therefore one of the first actions that MOPAWI were involved in was to create awareness over land tenure and help people to organise themselves at community level to be granted land rights. The indigenous population has been in negotiations with the government for nearly 10 years.

Patuca Dam project
Honduras cannot supply enough electricity to serve the current needs of its population and, since the 1960s, the government has been collecting detailed data from the Patuca River in La Moskitia to consider whether it would be a suitable source for hydroelectric power. There was already a dam in operation in a different part of the country but, during a very long dry season in 1994, it had to dramatically decrease its production of electricity and rationing was introduced. Since then Honduras has needed to buy electricity from neighbouring countries and the government has been under pressure from these countries and from its own industry to develop its own secure source of electricity.

In 1996 the government contracted two North American Companies to build a dam on the Patuca River, and granted them concessions to sell electricity back to them for the following 40 years. Therefore, with one slight of hand, the government had effectively provided natural resource rights to foreign companies, whereas 10 years of ‘negotiations’ with the indigenous population had produced no results.

The companies hired an agency from Costa Rica to undertake an environmental impact assessment to consider the likely effects of the proposed dam on the environment and the people there. This took 6 weeks to complete and there were fears that it was rushed through so that the dam could start as quickly as possible.

MOPAWI’s concerns
MOPAWI were concerned that this dam would have devastating consequences on La Moskitia:
- The dam would prevent the river from flooding, prevent the land becoming fertilised, and thus reduce food production.
- The Patuca River is the main form of transportation in the region and the dam would lower the water levels and make it more difficult for boats to pass up and down.
- A new road was planned which would have opened it up for migration of people into the region, threatening the land rights of the indigenous population, putting pressure on an already fragile ecosystem and increasing logging.
- The electricity was for the main industrial cities and La Moskitia would have been the last place in the country to receive a constant supply.

There was also evidence from a geologist that, with the high annual rainfall and a fragile ecosystem that is prone to erosion, the dam would be blocked after only a few years. The result would therefore have been environmental destruction but with no ongoing supply of electricity to show for it.

Advocacy action
- networking with organisations. The first step for MOPAWI was to work with other concerned groups to form a coalition including environmental groups, indigenous peoples groups and local government representatives. Due to mobilising the population over the previous issues of land rights, the people were organised and accustomed to representing themselves at every level.
- working with the community. At the same time they became involved in many popular awareness-raising activities. These included seminars with people in La Moskitia, a weekly programme on the national radio with a phone-
in discussion, and a press conference with the Honduras media.

- **Lobbying at government level.** They also met with the government and the companies involved to discuss the issues and represent their concerns. This was done in private meetings as well as through holding a public forum in the capital city to which the government, companies, indigenous groups, environmental groups and the media were invited.

- **Working at international level.** Early in 1997 MOPAWI contacted partner organisations in the UK, such as Tearfund, and in the US, such as the Native Lands Group and the International Rivers Network. MOPAWI asked them to put external pressure on the Honduran government and on the companies to halt the plans for the dam.

**Objectives of the campaign**
The coalition demanded the following action be taken:
- an environmental impact assessment of at least 18 months so that the likely effects on the environment and animals could be understood during all of the different seasons
- serious investigation of all alternative possibilities for providing power in the region
- granting the Patuca Region the status as a protected area
- granting communal land rights to the indigenous population

**What happened?**
The proposed dam became a subject of national interest and the construction companies, concerned that it may not have been a good investment, were more eager to talk, even though they were still planning to go ahead with the construction.

The coalition did not merely complain about the proposed dam but they tried to find alternative solutions. They recognised the need for electricity and showed that a series of smaller dams could be built throughout the country to provide more electricity. They also showed how through biomass, solar and wind energy, Honduras could produce enough electricity for the whole population.

**Personal danger**
The campaign was not without its danger to those involved. Carlos Luna, the mayor of one of the municipalities in the Patuca Region, was found killed in his office. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the campaign to protect the Patuca National Park and it is thought his death is connected in some way to this.

**Hurricane Mitch**
In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch tore through Honduras, causing untold destruction to homes and the environment. For more than 150 kilometres along the Patuca River huge swathes of the river bank and thousands of trees were completely washed away. There were mountains of trees and extensive silting along the riverbed. A subsequent impact study showed that, even if the dam had withstood the force of the hurricane and resulting river flow, it would have received so much silt and debris that it would have been unusable.

**The situation now**
In March 1999 the companies involved officially withdrew their involvement with the dam project. They said this was due to the level of local opposition. It must also be in part due to their realisation that the project was unworkable. However, the government still has plans to build the dam and is looking for other partners.

Apart from stopping the project for the moment, the campaign has enabled the people in La Moskitia to be better organised, it has strengthened the environmental movement in Honduras as a whole and more people are supportive of protecting natural forests.

**The Future**
The coalition is ready to deal with future proposals to build the dam. MOPAWI are still working with the indigenous communities and the government for land rights to be granted to the indigenous communities. When this happens they will be in a much stronger position to prevent unwanted development and to control their own future.

**Key advocacy learning points**
- Proposal of positive alternatives
- Strong national and international links
- Help community to understand rights
- Reliable and accurate research
- Holding the government to account for promises

Graham Gordon, Tearfund Policy Officer, graham.gordon@tearfund.org,
Osvaldo Munguia, Director, MOPAWI, mopawi@optinet.hn (August 2000)