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## Advocacy case studies

# LAND RIGHTS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN HONDURAS

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<b>COUNTRY:</b>	<b>Honduras</b>
<b>THEMES:</b>	<b>Land and property</b>
<b>ADVOCACY APPROACHES:</b>	<b>Community mobilisation; educating community members; government officials: lobbying; government officials: meeting with; working in alliances and coalitions</b>

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For more than three decades, Tearfund partner MOPAWI has worked in Honduras to fight for land rights for indigenous people. The Miskito people of eastern Honduras live in La Mosquitia, a beautiful, remote tropical rainforest, teeming with rare wildlife. Over the past few decades, they have faced enormous threats to their land from aggressive cattle ranchers, violent drug gangs and developers planning huge hydro-electric plants.

When MOPAWI started working in the region, they discovered that the indigenous people who lived there believed the land was theirs, when in fact it was classed as national land. This meant that no one had tenure and that anyone could ‘peacefully’ settle on the land and, in time, claim it as their own. MOPAWI worked to raise awareness of land tenure among indigenous people, and to help them to organise themselves and claim land rights.

The government tried to force through plans to build a large hydro-electric dam in the middle of traditional lands, with potentially cataclysmic consequences for the indigenous people and their livelihoods. In response, MOPAWI helped to establish a coalition between the indigenous community groups, other environmental groups and government representatives. They also met with the government and the companies involved to discuss the issues and present their concerns. This was done in private meetings, as well as through holding a public forum in the capital Tegucigalpa, to which the government, companies, indigenous groups, environmental groups and the media were invited.

MOPAWI also contacted partner organisations in the UK, such as Tearfund, and some in the US, such as the Native Lands Group and the International Rivers Network. It asked them to put external pressure on the Honduran government and the companies to halt plans for the dam. The proposed dam became a subject of national interest, and the construction companies, concerned that it may not be 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 oppose the proposed dam, but also 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.

In the end, the companies concerned officially withdrew their involvement in the dam project, citing local opposition as their reason.

Since then, the indigenous people of La Mosquitia have continued to organise themselves and to campaign for rights to their traditional lands. As a result, the government has now granted land titles to the Miskito indigenous people, for a huge area of their land – a total of 1,400,000 hectares or 14,000km<sup>2</sup>. The new titles class the area as community land and ‘inalienable’, which means that no one has individual rights to it and no one can sell it.