



International Learning Exchange

Delegation to El Salvador – May 21-25, 2022

From May 21-25, 2022, Communities of Faith Organizing for Action (COFOA) hosted 18 grassroots leaders, clergy, and organizers from seven countries in El Salvador. Participants included people organizing in Haiti, Mexico, Rwanda, South Africa, Slovakia, and Hungary, along with ten organizers and clergy from the U.S.

Over five dates, we met with dozens of people who introduced themselves as COFOA leaders, emphasized that "we all are COFOA," described the stage at which their community was in COFOA's organizing process, and what issues they were working on, including land and water rights, health clinics, and new schools. We learned how COFOA had structured its work to constantly bring in new people and religious congregations into the organization. We saw how COFOA's disciplined organizing process, which can take 8-12 months from initial exploratory meetings to tangible results, exposed people to experiences that grow their leadership and enable them to make concrete changes in their communities. And we learned how COFOA had



grown into a national movement with an expansive vision for transforming El Salvador by bringing local grassroots leaders together across communities to build political power and a shared vision and agenda.

On our first morning, on Saturday, we met with 60 grassroots leaders from COFOA's national Planning and Strategy Committee. They shared COFOA's 14-year history with us, updated us on their national land rights campaign, and prepared themselves for a public event at the Municipal Works Department on Monday. They explained that Salvadoran President Bukele had centralized resources dedicated to community development that local mayors and councils had previously administered. Frustrated by the lack of resources to pave roads, connect homes to clean water, and make other public improvements, COFOA leaders planned to bring their

priorities to the agency that now controlled the bulk of resources for community development. Grassroots leaders had identified priorities for each of the 120 communities in which they work. They collected signatures from 7,990 people supporting these priorities, and met with their local mayors to solicit their backing. At the prep meeting, one leader from each department where COFOA is organizing came forward to announce the number of people they were committing to bring to the event.



In the afternoon, we met with COFOA's 24-person staff team, which includes two lawyers, a communications specialist, and approximately 18 community organizers. We learned that COFOA is organized through 120 local leadership teams, engaging about 3,600 grassroots leaders who meet at least once or twice a month. The most active leaders from teams in each of the eleven departments where COFOA works meet as a departmental Planning and Strategy Committee.

Since summer 2020, COFOA has led a national RENACER (Rebirth) campaign to win land rights for 350,000 families. People from 60 subdivisions are now participating in the RENACER campaign. Despite setbacks and a slow process, COFOA leaders are now meeting regularly with top officials, including the National Housing Minister, and beginning to see subdivisions move toward receiving their titles. The Bukele Administration has also acknowledged COFOA's critique of the temporary legislation passed in 2020 to address the land title crisis.

On Sunday, we visited clergy and leaders in La Paz, the department where COFOA began and primarily worked during its first decade. Bishop Samuel Elias Bolaños said he invited COFOA to work in his diocese to empower lay people and ensure they had a voice in improving living conditions in their communities. He shared that he saw COFOA as an effective vehicle for putting Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology into practice in his diocese. We also met with a team of leaders in a community named La Galilea, who were the first people in COFOA to organize to win their titles. They proudly showed us the land titles they had received. They explained how gaining ownership to their land paved the way for other improvements in

their community and how their work with COFOA led them to take on leadership of their municipal community association.

On Monday morning, we accompanied 800+ COFOA leaders from across El Salvador as they tried to deliver the letters signed by 7,990 people to the Bukele Administration. Unfortunately, rather than receive the letters, the Municipal Works Department locked the doors of its



building. So COFOA leaders peacefully marched to another government office several blocks away. When officials closed the doors to that building, COFOA leaders spoke to the official inside the building through the cell phone of the security guard outside the building. Finally, they passed a letter under the door requesting a meeting.

While, the state of exception instituted by Salvador President Bukele in response to gang violence prohibited public gatherings, COFOA leaders believed they were exercising their constitutional right to petition the government. No police or military showed up, and there was no attempt to suppress the march and gathering. The leading media outlets in El Salvador covered COFOA's event, one of many similar actions that COFOA leaders have taken to elevate their demands and press for direct negotiations with high level officials. Before leaving the Municipal Works Department, COFOA leaders vowed to assemble in several weeks at the Presidential House to obtain a response from President Bukele to their demands.

In the afternoon, we met with Professor Omar Serrano, Vice-Rector for Social Issues at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in San Salvador. He shared how President Bukele and his New Ideas Party, created initially by Salvadorans living in the U.S., had taken advantage of popular dissatisfaction with the previous right and left-wing governments to gain and consolidate power. While Bukele has dismissed NGOs as pawns of international donors, his administration has had to engage with COFOA because the organization is supported by the Catholic Church and has a broad and active membership base.

After meeting with Professor Serrano, we visited the Monsignor Romero Center & Martyrs Museum at the UCA to learn more about the history of social struggle against poverty and oppression in El Salvador and the Catholic Church's role.



The following two days, we spent visiting local leaders and clergy in two regions in El Salvador where COFOA has recently begun working, Sonsonate and Chalatenango. In Sonsonate, we saw a glimpse of the power of diaspora relationships when Emma Paulino, a Faith in Action organizer from Oakland, CA, invited a leader she knows from the Bay Area, who was visiting family, to attend the COFOA meeting. She brought three family members, including a man who worked for a national legislator who had met with COFOA about their land rights campaign. Later, we visited a rural community organizing with COFOA to win access to clean water. Organizers and leaders on the delegation from Haiti shared the work they are doing to help small farmers adapt to climate change, and we had a good discussion about organizing on agricultural issues. Translating from Spanish to English to Haitian Creole and back again was a regular part of our days in El Salvador.

In Chalatenango, we met with grassroots leaders who began working with COFOA over the past two years and with Catholic Bishop Oswaldo Escobar. One highlight they shared was the success of one local team in organizing to have a school built in their community; something people have needed and wanted for decades. Many of the most neglected communities in this part of El Salvador near the Honduran border require long travel to reach. Organizers described staying overnight in the communities where they work to attend meetings and train and coach leaders. As with most of the communities we visited, the common recipe was a bishop or other religious leader welcoming COFOA to work with their congregations, a careful process of meeting with clergy and other community leaders to understand the environment, convening and training groups of leaders to function as teams, large-scale listening campaigns designed to reach every family in the community, a vote on the concerns raised by people, research meetings with officials, and public events to negotiate new investments in the community.

When we debriefed the week, people who participated in the delegation highlighted how COFOA's disciplined approach to organizing was growing the membership and power of the organization. People described COFOA as a reminder of the importance of investing in volunteer leaders and trusting that the experience of working for local change in your community can be a foundation for structural change. Participants from the U.S. reflected that, in many cases, as their and other organizations have grown, the center of gravity and power in the organization has shifted from volunteer leaders to paid staff. It was impressive to see the discipline in how COFOA organizers are being trained and coached to work through leaders and invest in their political and leadership development. We were also impressed by clear structures (Local Organizing Committees, departmental Planning and Strategy Committees, and a National Planning and Strategy Committee) that enable grassroots leaders to build relationships and trust and make collective decisions. It was inspiring to hear that COFOA has a vision of creating a Central America Planning and Strategy Committee. This structure would enable grassroots leaders to work together across national lines to tackle the root causes of poverty and migration in the region.



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