



# Organizing for Power in El Salvador

## A Case Study of a National Land Rights Campaign

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COVER: Emilia Pérez de Quinteros, Colonia Galilea, departamento La Paz

## Introduction

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On September 7, 2021, El Salvador became the first country to adopt Bitcoin as a currency. President Nayib Bukele said that cryptocurrency would improve El Salvador's economy and help Salvadorans escape poverty.<sup>1</sup> Through the promotion of Bitcoin, Bukele assured international investors access to cheap oceanside real estate. Meanwhile, 350,000 Salvadoran families (one in five in the country) are waiting for their land titles, having been defrauded by private housing developers. Bukele has also promised lower energy costs for businesses at-scale, while many Salvadorans cannot access to electricity and portable water.

Salvadoran citizens have been fighting for their land for over two decades, but have not been able to get support from the government to hold private developers accountable. Land rights didn't reach the top of the public agenda in El Salvador until two dozen grassroots leaders began working with Communities of Faith Organizing in Action (COFOA) in 2018. They began organizing their own local communities. Their success in gaining title to their land in four developments garnered attention from people who had also been defrauded, across El Salvador. In summer 2020, during the height of the pandemic, they came together as members of COFOA to launch a national campaign known as RENACER, a Spanish acronym meaning "National Network in Action with Hope and Resistance." Their goal was to win land titles for 350,000 families by passing and implementing a permanent Law of Lotifications and Subdivisions for Housing and obtain public investment for water systems, electricity, paved streets, green spaces, schools, and health clinics in these subdivisions. By 2022, teams of grassroots leaders in 58 developments, home to more than 7,500 families, were actively participating in RENACER. They had gained national media attention and begun negotiating with national officials to obtain land titles worth more than one billion dollars.<sup>2</sup>

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*Salvadoran citizens have been fighting for their land for over two decades, but have not been able to get support from the government to hold private developers accountable.*

COFOA is the Central American affiliate of the Faith in Action International, a movement of people of faith and faith institutions working for social change through bottom-up grassroots organizing. Faith in Action uses a congregation-community organizing approach, in which churches, mosques, temples and synagogues of all denominations and traditions serve as the institutional base for community organizations led by local residents. COFOA was founded in 2008 at the initiative of the Central American Catholic Bishops.<sup>3</sup> Through participation in COFOA's leadership training, grassroots leaders learn how to tell their story and engage in a one-on-one conversation with their neighbors to identify priority issues; analyze policy, identify institutions and individuals responsible for their issues, and dialogue with public officials to hold them accountable and pressure them to take action. Since its inception, local residents in some of the most neglected communities in El Salvador have worked with COFOA to secure \$20 million in government investments in their communities to build bridges, roads, connect homes to clean water and electricity.

This case study examines how COFOA has used disciplined grassroots organizing methods to build a national land rights campaign that is changing the underlying systems and

<sup>1</sup> Cuellar, J. (2021, September 15). *Bitcoin Sanctuaries. Sidecar.*

<sup>2</sup> With monthly payments averaging between \$15-25 dollars and loan periods 10-12 years, 350,000 families would have paid an estimated \$850 million to developers.

<sup>3</sup> (2020). Keep it Local: Analysis and recommendations for getting U.S. foreign assistance to people, places, and priorities that need it the most in Central America. *The Root Causes Initiative (2020).*

structure that lead to poverty, violence and migration in Central America. The report analyzes how ordinary Salvadorans have developed the skills and organizational power to change the political mechanisms that have allowed private developers to defraud 350,000 families across El Salvador. The case study notes the importance of listening and building relationships in local communities, the influence of leadership training to empower citizens to become politically engaged, the personal transformation of participants, the historical context of land dispossession, and power of land ownership to achieve economic stability and political empowerment.

## **METHODS**

In November 2021, Juri Sanchez traveled from the U.S to El Salvador for a week to conduct research with Communities of Faith Organizing for Action. Alongside COFOA's staff, Sanchez visited nine communities across five departments in El Salvador. She collected oral stories through nine one-on-one interviews and three focus groups. Sanchez also observed two public action events, one intake conversation between inhouse lawyers and grassroots leaders, a staff meeting, and one reflection assembly with leaders. In addition, Sanchez conducted a literature review and collected and reviewed primary documents, including the Temporary Special Law for the Regularization of Subdivisions for Residential Use.

## Taking the Time to Listen



*“At my previous organization, the staff decided on the project, and who the beneficiaries would be, unlike COFOA, where the projects, issues, and solutions arise from the community.”*

– **Guadalupe Santos, COFOA organizer**

Guadalupe Santos, a social worker and now community organizer, recently joined the staff of COFOA from another non-profit organization. Santos said that although her previous organization positively impacted communities, residents never had a voice in the projects implemented in their neighborhoods. Many non-profit organizations in developing countries, such as El Salvador, lead initiatives to improve conditions by determining a project they see as a need, identifying a community to benefit, and mobilizing support. As Santos expressed, COFOA operates differently in that it approaches communities through invitations from local clergy or civic leaders and begins its work by listening to large numbers of people. COFOA sees itself as a movement of people of faith organizing for social change rather than a non-profit organization delivering solutions.

COFOA has fostered a movement by building a constituency of people who take the time to listen to their neighbors’ concerns through one-on-one conversations. In 2016, a handful of women from the community of La Galilea in the La Paz Department visited the COFOA office and asked for help in obtaining titles to their land. COFOA had a decade of experience organizing local communities in La Paz to access clean water, safe roads, bridges, and health clinics. But the organization had not worked with families to obtain land titles, and staff and volunteer leaders did not have deep knowledge about the issue. But utilizing the framework of organizing, they began to learn.



*Lotificación El Pitarrillo 2, Municipio de Nejapa, departamento de San Salvador*

COFOA advised the grassroots leaders from La Galilea to begin a listening campaign, to go door-to-door to listen to every family in the community. This process reinforced the high interest in the community in fighting for titles. It also helped identify 84 families (out of 362) who would actively participate in the campaign and eventually win the title to their land. After the listening process, the Galilea leaders organized a research committee, which began meeting with local officials, and eventually, the national housing finance agency. They learned that the government had taken ownership of their land as a result of fraud by the original developer. This made their situation different from most other families without titles, whose land is still registered to the original landowner. After two years working with COFOA, the Galilea leaders won a Presidential Decree that gave them ownership to the land they had paid off 20 years earlier.

After their success, the grassroots leaders from La Galilea shared their experience at COFOA meetings and with friends and family in other communities, who then approached COFOA for help. By December 2018, families in four additional developments were organizing through listening campaigns and research committees to obtain land titles. They were negotiating with the same private developer, ARGOZ, that had subdivided each of their developments, accepted their payments, but never followed through in transferring land ownership. COFOA began to generate media coverage about the land rights issue through meetings with elected officials, marches, and public efforts. Eventually, National Housing Minister Michelle Sol responded in the press, saying that 350,000 families in the country had paid off their debt but not received their land titles. This was the first time that COFOA leaders were able to put a number on the scale of the problem they were trying to solve.

While the exact details vary by development and developer, one-in-five families in the country had been defrauded similarly.

For example, leader Basilia Suyapa Canales de Faustino (Suyapa) from Lotification Cimarron in La Libertad paid off her parcel of land over a decade ago and still has not been able to get her land title. Suyapa's family leased their parcel of land from the private housing-developer ARGOZ and made monthly payments. When Suyapa's family made their final installment payment, they received a "paid off" receipt from ARGOZ. Suyapa's husband asked ARGOZ, "what about our land title?" ARGOZ told him that the landowner had died and they would work on getting the land title.

Years went by, and Suyapa's family had not received their land title and did not understand why. With COFOA's leadership training, Suyapa went to the National Registry Center to get an Extracted Certification that included the owner's name, percentage of rights, and the legal status of the property.<sup>4</sup> Suyapa learned she had been lied to by ARGOZ; the original owner of her subdivision was still alive.

ARGOZ, which was established in 1977, is the largest of 200 private housing developers in El Salvador. ARGOZ uses a business model that includes subdividing privately-owned urban plots of land for leasing to low-income families with an option to purchase.<sup>5</sup> Developers like ARGOZ do not typically own the land; they make agreements with large landowners interested in selling. ARGOZ takes over the responsibility of selling and leasing parcels of land, subdividing the land into lots of a minimum of 100 square meters, with green spaces and planned roads, and registering the plot of land with the National Registry Center so that residents can receive their land titles. The leases usually involve 8–12-year loans, with \$15-25 per month payments.<sup>6</sup> Once a loan is paid off, families should receive title.

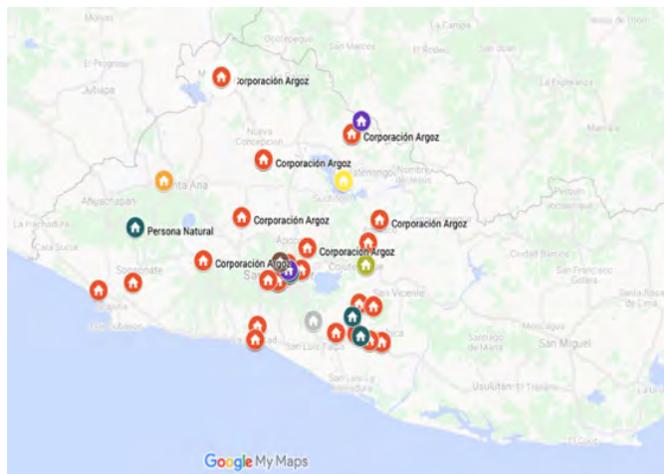
4 Preguntas frecuentes. (n.d.). *Centro Nacional de Registros*. Retrieved February 2, 2022

5 *El Salvador Private Development: ARGOZ*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2021

6 Ferguson, B., & Navarrete, J. (2003). A financial framework for reducing slums: Lessons from experience in Latin America. *Environment and Urbanization*, 15(2), 201–216.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case for 350,000 families in El Salvador. Suyapa does not have her land title because ARGOZ did not register the sub-division with the National Registry Center. ARGOZ sold Suyapa a lot in an illegal subdivision of rural land for urban use.<sup>7</sup> However, El Salvador doesn't have a law that holds private developers accountable for selling illegal subdivisions. So, although Suyapa has a document that proves her parcel of land is paid off, the National Registry Center cannot register her as the owner until ARGOZ regulates and registers the plot of land. Since a law isn't in place that forces private developers to regulate and register parcels of land, ARGOZ hasn't prioritized it and has been defrauding residents for the past two decades.

Suyapa's lotification Cimmaron is not the only community private housing developers defrauded. By the beginning of 2022, COFOA had organized residents across nine Departments in fifty-eight lotifications managed by the private-developers, including: ARGOZ, Guillermo Moran, Ishuatan S.A de C.V, Natural, Miraflores, Moran Peraza y CIA, Persona Natural, and Proyectos Dinámicos S.A (right).<sup>8</sup>



Through one-on-one conversations and cultivating relationships, 84 families from the department of La Paz not only won title to their own land, but helped build an organized constituency of 7,500 families fighting for their land titles across El Salvador. In September 2020, they officially launched the RENACER campaign- The National Network in Action with Hope and Resistance.

### KEY TAKEAWAY FOR ORGANIZERS:



- There is no shortcut to systematically listening to the concerns of large numbers of people in a community. Building a broad and engaged base requires a commitment to speak to every family, often more than once.
- Extensive listening campaigns led by local residents serve to identify underlying issues that might have been missed, surface new grassroots leaders, and build energy within a community to fight together for change.
- Local campaigns rooted in concrete problems can become the foundation for large-scale systemic change at the national level.
- Bringing grassroots leaders who are organizing their own communities together to build relationships and share stories creates capacity for people to act jointly to change larger systems.

<sup>7</sup> *EL SALVADOR COUNTRY LAND ASSESSMENT*. (2012). World Bank.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/2/edit?mid=1kHlfhq6IStnW-Xqg51pGEj-FfKLz4gtM&usp=sharing>

## Awakening Political Leaders



*“I have been formed as a leader and have been able to go into offices where people in power are to demand my rights.*

**– Hugo Alarcon from Lotificacion Encarnacion in La Libertad**

Once the RENACER campaign had a strong base of leaders with a shared goal of winning their land titles, they started the research phase that would move them towards action. During the research phase, COFOA formed a national Research Committee consisting of 20 leaders directly impacted by the issue who could represent their communities. Each member had participated in the leg work of listening and learning about the land title issues in their communities. Once the Research Committee was established, members participated in leadership training to learn to analyze policy, identify institutions and individuals responsible for land titles, and dialogue with public officials and private developers. Organizers helped grassroots leaders prepare talking points for meetings.

Leadership training is pivotal to building a movement where people feel empowered to fight for their rights. Hugo Alarcon from Lotificacion Encarnacion in La Libertad is a member of the Research Committee. He said he gained the confidence to speak with public officials through COFOA’s investment in his leadership. Alarcon said:

*“COFOA’s staff has empowered and taught us to dialogue with public officials. Before COFOA, I wasn’t politically involved. Now, I know how to read and analyze policies, read a contract, and build community. United, we are stronger!”*

Although it was Alarcon’s first time being politically engaged, other citizens have been fighting for over a decade for their land titles. Citizens were advocating individually or as part of small projects, at times with help from paid lawyers and NGOs. But public officials rarely listened to residents or took any action to fix the land registrations. Often, Salvadorans felt defeated because doors kept closing. They could not see a path to gaining ownership of their land.

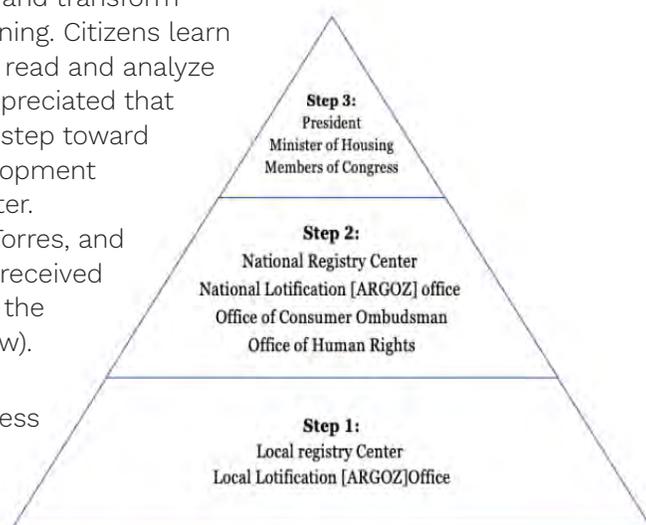


*Delivering letters to President Bukele from 800 COFOA families*

Pastor Silvestre Jose Torres from La Libertad is a volunteer leader with COFOA and a member of the RENACER Research Committee. He joined COFOA after learning about their leadership approach to training people with the skills and tools to fight for social change. Before joining COFOA, Pastor Torres had fought for his land title but had no success. Pastor Torres shared:

*“The issue with land titles is not new. Politicians and other organizations are aware of it and take advantage of communities’ vulnerability. Previously to COFOA, another organization came into our community and told us they would help us with our land titles and charged us a fee. They took our money, and we never saw any results. As for politicians, when they are campaigning, they promise to address the issue with land titles because politicians need our vote, but they are all lying because here we are with no land titles.”*

Pastor Torres trusts COFOA’s staff because COFOA is not charging communities a fee. Instead, COFOA organizes people to fight in unity and transform neighborhoods by providing them with leadership training. Citizens learn how to identify an issue, research who is responsible, read and analyze laws, and dialogue with public officials. Torres also appreciated that COFOA understood that winning titles was just a first step toward making community improvements, which in his development includes a high priority on gaining access to clean water. Throughout the leadership training process, Alarcon, Torres, and the rest of the members of the Research Committee received mentorship from COFOA’s staff and legal advice from the inhouse lawyers to investigate critical questions (below).



1. Who is responsible for citizens not having access to their land titles?
2. How long have citizens gone without their land titles?
3. How many citizens do not have their land titles across El Salvador?
4. Who benefits from citizens not having their land titles?
5. Who is/are responsible for guaranteeing citizens can access their land title?

Once they began getting answers, they drew a power scale (right) with three sets of institutions with the power and responsibility to grant 350,000 families their land titles. With the power scale, the Research Committee strategized which institutions to target, how to approach them, and what their demands would be. Then they led research actions where leaders visited institutions and engaged directly with public officials who have the power to grant land titles.

### **Who is responsible for citizens not having access to their land titles?**

Although the private developers, such as ARGOZ, are defrauding communities, the key institution responsible for citizens not having their land titles is the government of El Salvador (step 3: President, Minister of Housing, and Members of Legislative Assembly). El Salvador does not have an established law with specific requirements on how private housing developers should subdivide and sell parcels of land. In 2012 Legislative Assembly enacted a one-year Land Subdivision Special Transitionary Law to regularize informal subdivisions.<sup>9</sup> Since the law was transitionary, it was only in place for one year, so many private developers let the year pass and did not take any action to regulate parcels.

<sup>9</sup> EL SALVADOR COUNTRY LAND ASSESSMENT. (2012). World Bank.

### How long have citizens gone without their land titles?

Many families paid off their loans 15 to 20 years ago. Still, because they never received land titles, they cannot access funds to make improvements, sell, or pass their land on, which has left these communities in limbo. Municipalities also refuse to invest funds in roads, portable water, creating green spaces, or building schools and health clinics in these communities because they lack land titles.

### How many citizens do not have their land titles across El Salvador?

The El Salvador Ministry of Housing estimates that 350,000 families across El Salvador don't have their land titles. This represents one out of five families in the country, concentrated in communities at the periphery of towns and cities.

### Who benefits from citizens not having their land titles?

Private housing developers benefit from not regulating parcels of land and preventing parcels from being registered and permitted with titles. Irregular subdivisions account for approximately 50–70 percent of housing development for low-income communities in El Salvador. As of 2000, ARGOZ earned over nine million dollars by leasing subdivisions of land.<sup>10</sup> Cutting corners has saved developers money and allowed them to continue defrauding families. Since families have no legal ownership of their land, they are forced to borrow funds at high-interest rates from the same developers who sold them the property in the first place. As a result, people risk losing their land if they default on these new loans, which creates another source of revenue for developers.

### Who is responsible for guaranteeing citizens can access their land title?

Two scenarios can guarantee citizens their land titles where specific institutions are responsible.

**Scenario 1:** *Private developers* register parcels of land with the National Registry Center.

**Scenario 2:** *Legislative Assembly* passes a law that states private developers must regulate and register parcels of land.

## KEY TAKEAWAY FOR ORGANIZERS:



- Start local, but use research actions to guide people upstream.
- Connect the dots between what people are experiencing in their communities and larger policy decisions and systems.
- Seek advice from trusted lawyers who know and have experience with the topic (COFOA hired two in-house lawyers).
- Relentlessly ask who else has the same problem and how we can make common cause to build enough power to win.
- Issues tied to people's clear self-interest and long-term frustrations (like not having title to their land) are magnets for bringing new people and communities into an organization.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, B., & Navarrete, J. (2003). A financial framework for reducing slums: Lessons from experience in Latin America. *Environment and Urbanization*, 15(2), 201–216.

# Strength in Numbers

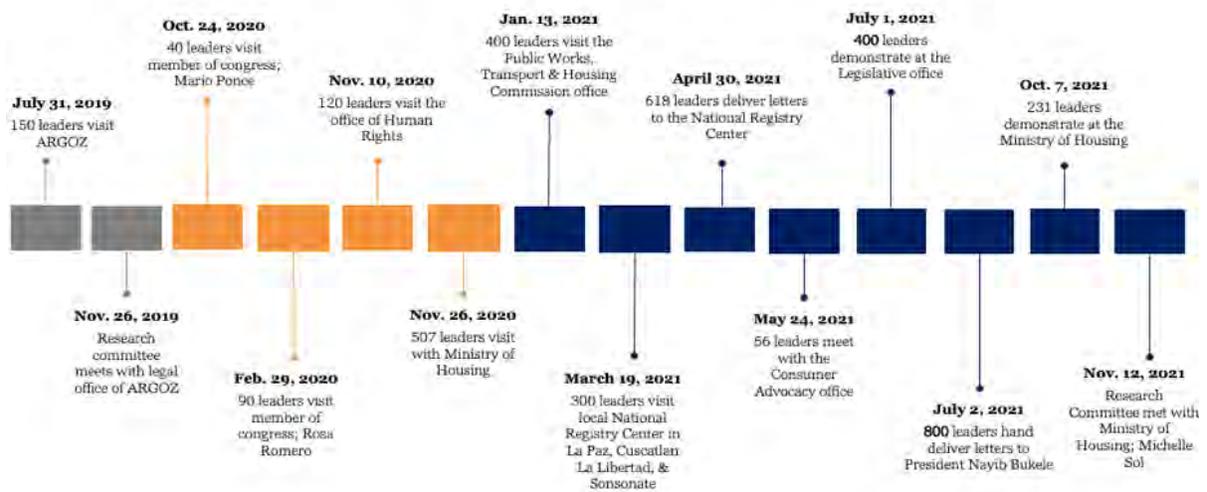


*“Public officials are finally listening to us!”*

– **Leader Alberto Martinez, Sonsonate.**

From 2020-22, the RENACER Campaign organized research meetings, led high-profile events to pressure public officials, and built a national movement that has made it possible for grassroots leaders to meet and negotiate with the Minister of Housing Michelle Sol. During this time, the residents leading RENACER have gathered monthly and for special meetings to share what they are learning and make collective decisions about the campaign. Grassroots leaders decide who will represent the campaign in meetings with officials and what their demands will be.

Below is a timeline of the RENACER actions.



*Heídi de Henríquez, Lotificación La Paz 2, Municipio de San Pedro Masahuat, departamento de La Paz speaking with National Housing Minister Michelle Sol.*

COFOA's first research action was on July 31, 2019, when 150 leaders gathered outside ARGOZ's national office in San Salvador. They aimed to talk with ARGOZ officials to start a negotiating process to legalize subdivisions. Next, a research committee of 13 COFOA leaders returned on November 26, 2019 to meet with ARGOZ's legal department to get a progress update. Leaders saw that ARGOZ wasn't taking any actions towards legalizing subdivisions, so they began working with lawyers to write a law reform that could hold private developers accountable for selling unregistered parcels and force them to legalize subdivisions.

Once they had a proposed law reform, COFOA organized research actions with members of the Legislative Assembly and the Human Rights office to get their support for the legislation. COFOA leaders then met with the Ministry of Housing and the Office of Public Works, Transport & Housing to submit their proposed law reform to President Bukele's government. By now, the RENACER Campaign had been pressuring public officials, including local and national offices of the National Registry Center, for a year and a half.

On April 30, 2021, Pastor Torres and Alarcon were among 618 leaders who went to the National Registry Center to deliver letters that solicited a meeting with the Director to get extracted certificates of leaders' parcels of land. The National Registry Center saw the number of people demonstrating outside of their office and immediately took the meeting with the Research Committee. COFOA leaders met with the agency's Director, who handed them extracted certifications for land where leaders purchased parcels from private developers. It was a minor triumph because the National Registry Center did not meet with residents for years, let alone give them extracted certifications because the leaders were not the "official owner" of the land.

The leaders needed the extracted certifications to learn why their parcels of land were not registered and identify the owner and the private housing developer that manages the land. The National Registry Center met with the RENACER Campaign because they felt the strength in numbers. Pastor Torres said, "Ever since we started organizing as the RENACER campaign with COFOA, many Public Offices are opening their doors, and we are engaging with decision-makers."

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**– Pastor Torres**

As doors were opening, the RENACER Campaign began to see the fruit of their labor. By the end of May 2021, the 84 families from Lotification La Galilea were granted their land titles. With this victory, the RENACER Campaign knew that if they continued to organize, they could win land titles for all 350,000 families in El Salvador. Initially, the RENACER Campaign targeted private developers and then shifted its efforts to the Housing of Ministry and Legislative Assembly. COFOA wanted to impact policy that would protect the citizens of El Salvador and not private developers. They needed a law that would force developers to regulate and register parcels of land with the National Registry Center so residents could reliably obtain their deeds.

As a result of the pressure from the RENACER Campaign, the Minister of Housing wrote a Special Law of Lotifications and Subdivisions for Housing Use, which was scheduled to be officially announced on July 1, 2021. Despite being pleased that Salvadoran President Bukele was responding to their pressure, COFOA's analysis of the draft law was that it would leave many families with no solution. A major weakness of the legislation was that it excluded subdivisions in "protection zones, by rivers, streams, and risk areas." Bukele's proposal, like previous laws, also did not set clear penalties for developers and was designed to be in effect for just one year.

Before Bukele officially presented the law to the National Assembly, COFOA organized a large event to demand improvements. During a discussion about the Special Law of Lotifications in the National Assembly, 400 leaders demonstrated outside with signs stating the flaws of the laws. Due to the number of people speaking out against the proposed legislation, President Bukele decided to postpone filing the legislation.

On July 2, 2021, the day after the legislation was initially supposed to have been presented to the National Assembly, more than 800 COFOA leaders hand-delivered personalized letters to the Presidential House requesting a meeting with President Bukele to discuss the proposed law.

Alberto Martinez from Lotification Santa Isabel in the department of Sonsonate was among the leaders who demonstrated outside of Bukele's house. With pride and a bright smile, Martinez says, *"It was powerful to see so many people in unity, and it felt good being there because public officials were finally listening to us!"* Martinez joined COFOA in March 2021 after hearing an interview about the RENACER Campaign with Director Alberto Velazquez-Trujillo and Assistant Director Manual Ceron on the YSKL radio station. Like Pastor Torres, Martinez had organized in his community to win titles, but public officials had not listened to them. During the radio interview, Martinez heard Velazquez-Trujillo's call of action, *"If you have been defrauded by private developers and want to fight for your right to access your land titles, and transform our society to become socially just, join the RENACER Campaign."* Martinez called COFOA immediately, and the next day, Organizer Wilber Hernandez visited his community in Sonsonate. Following his meeting with Wilber, Martinez organized the rest of Lotification Santa Isabel to join the RENACER Campaign. *"We are a community of 26 families that officials ignored,"* said Martinez, *"but now we are a movement of more than 7,500 people across the county that Public Officials are listening to now!"*

Build, unite, pressure, and dialogue are the strategies COFOA applied to finally get a seat at the table to negotiate a solution that would cover all families struggling to obtain their titles. COFOA could not stop the passage of the flawed subdivision legislation in a National Assembly entirely controlled by President Bukele's New Ideas party. However, due to the organization's high-stakes actions at the Presidential House and other government offices, COFOA leaders received the reaction they were seeking. President Bukele replied with a letter to COFOA, re-stating almost word-for-word RENACER's criticisms of the flaws in the legislation. He assigned his Housing Minister, Michelle Sol, to work with COFOA to improve the law.

After several months of delays, on November 12, 2021, the RENACER Research Committee finally met with Minister Sol at the National Fund for Popular Housing offices. They discussed the gaps in the Transitional Law and reviewed reforms that COFOA had delivered to her office in advance. During the meeting, Minister Sol shared that fifteen lotifications were currently becoming regulated through the Transitory law. The RENACER Campaign has fifty-eight lotifications identified. All do not qualify to be regulated under the Transitional law but they received a commitment from Minister Sol to further discuss a legal process to regulate those excluded from the legislation. In the meantime, Minister Sol asked the RENACER Campaign to gather documentation for the fifty-eight lotifications and deliver the information to her legal team to begin regulating lotifications. Two weeks later, COFOA dropped off the documentation for fifty-eight lotification, encompassing 7,500 families. Michelle Sol also agreed to create a working group between COFOA, the Ministry Housing, National Registry Center, and the mayors of the municipalities where unregistered lotifications are located.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY FOR ORGANIZERS:**



- Show up in numbers with people who have a direct stake in the issue
- Keep putting pressure on public officials using creative tactics
- Do everything possible to get into direct conversation with key decision-makers
- Use all forms of media, newspapers, radio shows, television, and social media to influence decision-makers directly and attract more people to the campaign.

## Power of Landownership

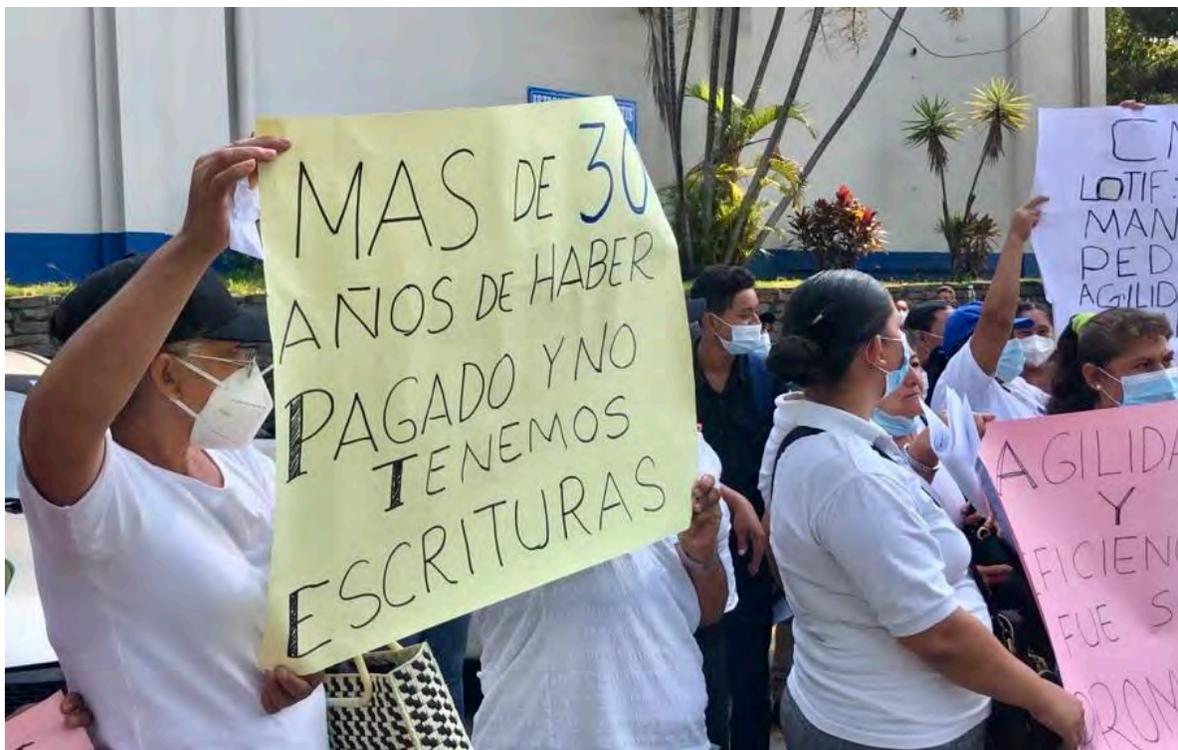


*“We aren’t just fighting for land titles; we’re fighting for electricity, clean water, and safe roads.”*

– **Transita Rivas-Juarez, a COFOA leader from Lotification El Cauca in La Paz**

During the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, wealthy families used political power and violence to steal people’s land. They then passed laws that prevented people from voting if they didn’t own land. Communities could not pass down their land because it was taken from them, and elitist governance suppressed their rights. Similarly, today, in El Salvador, you cannot build generational wealth or live a dignified life if you don’t own your land. You cannot pass down your land, acquire a bank loan or hold public officials accountable for neighborhood improvements.

Since 1983, the Salvadoran people have had the constitutional right to own their land. Yet, the State has not guaranteed this right across the board. Today’s fight for land titles is linked to the displacement of indigenous communities that traces back to 1821, when El Salvador gained independence from Spain. After independence, the people who held power were elite creoles and mestizos (individuals of European descent). The elites seized land from indigenous and farmworker communities to expand their wealth and maintain control over society.<sup>11</sup> They were able to steal the land through *vagrancy laws* passed by a Legislative Assembly controlled by elites.



Some families have been waiting for more than 30 years

<sup>11</sup> Navas, C. (2015). *Derecho a la Tierra y Empoderamiento Económico de las Mujeres Rurales en El Salvador*. 159 (Grupo de Trabajo: Impactos a Gran Escala), 150.

El Salvador's 1824 constitution included a clause that stated the Legislative Assembly would consist of 70 seats, of which 42 would be held by landowners.<sup>12</sup> In addition, you only had the right to vote for an Assembly seat if you were a landowner.<sup>13</sup> The elites stole land, converted it to coffee and sugar plantations, hired people from communities they took the land from to work the farms, and let them live on the land as long as they followed their rules<sup>14</sup>. The dispossession of land and the formation of the Legislative Assembly is directly linked to the institutional racism in El Salvador. Without explicitly using language to exclude indigenous communities from holding legislative seats, the constitution effectively excluded them by leaving them landless and denying them the right to vote. The constitution has been amended since 1842, but its effects are still present today.

Organizing for land rights in El Salvador isn't new; the Farmworkers' Rebellion in 1932 was organized by Farabundo Marti, who called for land redistribution. The National Guard quickly shut the movement down by executing Marti following a massacre of 30,000 indigenous people, known as *La Matanza*. Although land redistribution didn't happen, and communities were decimated, these events fueled people without possession of their land to continue organizing to own their land one day. Fifty years later, on October 10, 1980, the National Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), named after the farmworkers' rebellion, was formed. The FMLN demanded land reform and structural change from the government of El Salvador, which led to the civil war.

The civil war lasted twelve years, which exacerbated the displacement of people. The U.S. played a crucial role by sending \$6 billion to support El Salvador's military and government from 1979 to 1992. The civil war killed 75,000 people and forced more than one million people from their homes. Half a million migrated to the U.S., while others migrated to Mexico, Canada, and Australia.<sup>15</sup> Many of those who migrated within El Salvador moved into unregulated subdivisions on the periphery of towns and cities. These areas didn't have access to water, electricity, streets, and public services. Although the civil war ended in 1992 with the Chapultepec Peace Agreement, which included a Land Redistributing Program, only 3,305 properties were distributed to 36,100 people over the next seven years<sup>16</sup>. After the land distribution program ended, many families, including many RENACER leaders, who were left out, opted to purchase plots of land from private developers. By 2018, when COFOA began organizing for land titles, many Salvadorans who followed this path had paid off their plot of land over twenty years ago and had still yet to see a land title.

When COFOA leader Rivas-Juarez says, "we aren't just fighting for land titles, we are fighting for water, safe, clean roads, and electricity," – she describes the injustices that municipalities can legally deny people on unregulated land basic public infrastructure. Since the subdivisions are unregistered, the individual plots of land and the area set aside for common spaces technically still belong to the private developers or original owners. So local governments are not legally bound to provide public services on private land. Without land titles, communities are unable to access their basic needs. In addition, they cannot sell their land, pass it down to their children and families, and cannot claim their land as an asset.

12 Corriveau-Borque, Alexandre. (2013). *Beyond land redistribution: Lessons learned from El Salvador's unfulfilled agrarian revolution. Land and Post Conflict Peacebuilding*. p. 321-346.

13 Welch, C. (n.d.). *United in the Struggle: The Role of Land Titles for Communities of Internally Displaced Persons in El Salvador*. 51.

14 Welch, Corie. (2018). *United in the Struggle: The Role of Land Titles for Communities of Internally Displaced Persons in El Salvador. International Development, Community and Environment (IDCE)*, 51. Clark University Clark Digital Commons.

15 Cervantes, C. M. and A. G. (2018, August 27). *El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Drive Migration*. Migrationpolicy.Org.

16 Unstoppable: 2020 Impact Report. *Faith in Action*.

In Spring 2022, as COFOA continued to campaign for land rights, the organization launched a second national campaign to channel public investment into marginalized communities across El Salvador. COFOA leaders have been going door-to-door in more than 110 communities to ask people what improvements they would like to see and hold neighborhood assemblies to vote on priorities. As this case study is being released, COFOA is planning a large event in San Salvador where residents from across the country will deliver their priorities to the Ministry of Public Works, which under President Bukele has centralized community-development funding. COFOA is also working with other faith-based organizations to press the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to re-program funding from large for-profit development companies and international NGOs to local Salvadoran organizations and community development priorities identified by local residents.

### **KEY TAKEAWAY FOR ORGANIZERS:**



- Our current organizing stands on the shoulders of historical freedom struggles that are a source of motivation and inspiration. We carry on a long tradition of organizing.
- Good issue cuts, like demanding title to the land people own, open the door for other campaigns. They are the building blocks for larger community transformation.
- Rather than making the immediate issue the end, see it as a stepping stone for the next campaign and a process of building community power and a larger vision of change.
- Fighting for land ownership is especially important because it gives people more power to fight for their other rights. Organizing looks for issues that improve people's material conditions and make them and their communities more powerful.

## Personal Transformation



*“Ever since I became part of the RENACER Campaign, I get sick less because I am busy organizing. I feel positive, valued, and I can do anything! As women, we have the strength with God’s guidance.”*

**– Basilia Suyapa Canales de Faustino (Suyapa) from Lotification Cimarron in La Libertad**

Through COFOA and the RENACER campaign, Salvadorans have utilized a disciplined organizing methodology to unite, put aside their fear, and carry on a long struggle to transform their country. This could not have been done without COFOA’s dedicated leadership and trained community organizers. The organizers meet leaders where they are physically, educationally, and emotionally. As a result of COFOA’s support, transparency, follow-up, and mentorship, many leaders have experienced a personal transformation.

COFOA has a diverse group of people leading the RENACER Campaign – ranging from veteran organizers to citizens who’ve never been politically engaged. Some Salvadorans have been afraid to organize out of fear of political retribution from the government or violence in their communities. Others have been intimidated to engage in political affairs because of their limited awareness of public policies and limited access to formal schooling. Suyapa, who was quoted earlier in the region, was afraid of joining COFOA because she didn’t have a formal education but became encouraged to join when Wilber, an organizer, told her that schooling didn’t matter for participation in COFOA. Suyapa shared that since joining COFOA, she has learned how to express herself, dialogue with public officials, and advocate and fight for human rights as a community. Her reading and writing skills have improved throughout the process, and her health and self-esteem have enhanced.



*Rosa Miriam, Lotificación Ostuma, Municipio Santa María Ostuma, departamento de La Paz*

Approximately 65-70 percent of COFOA's 300 core volunteer leaders are women. Women have led most of RENACER's public marches and negotiations with government officials. In this way, COFOA has been a vehicle for challenging the patriarchal ways in which power operates in the country. Deisy Valles from Lotification Huisculapa in La Paz shared that before COFOA, she was afraid of organizing. Valles paid off her lot of land 25 years ago in a single lump sum. When she asked for her title, representatives from ARGOZ said they had issues with the owner but were working on it. Years went by, and Valles never received her title. She joined COFOA after hearing about the RENACER Campaign on the radio and quickly began to organize others in her community to join. Before COFOA, Valles had not organized because she thought organizing led to violence. Since joining COFOA, Valles has participated in multiple demonstrations, which she describes as peaceful. Valles quotes, "I usually don't participate in actions because I am afraid, but all the marches I've participated in with COFOA have been peaceful. COFOA taught me how to speak with public officials, and I feel safe attending actions as COFOA." Since COFOA's leadership training Valles has also been organizing her community to access electricity and build safe and clean roads.

Leaders have tapped into their political consciousness and have experienced the power of organizing. Transita Rivas-Juarez is a veteran organizer who has been organizing her Lotification El Cauca for over a decade. Rivas-Juarez joined COFOA in 2019 after her friend told her about the land rights organizing. She quickly organized the rest of the residents in her lotification. They started attending meetings, protests, and anything that would continue building the movement. Although Rivas-Juarez was a veteran organizer, this was the first time she saw responses from public officials. She said, "Before, we were not gaining traction because we were only one, but now that we are fifty-eight united lotifications, we will win! I have learned that I am not alone; I have brothers and sisters that have my back." Fighting in solidarity for land titles has brought communities together and taught them they too could hold a seat in the Legislative Assembly. Rivas-Juarez hopes to see COFOA leaders have seats within the Legislative Assembly in the near future to represent the people.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ORGANIZERS



- Organizers play a central role in developing leaders; to be successful organizers need to be relational, transparent, honest, companionate, accountable, and patient.
- The job of the organizer is not to mobilize people or tell them what to do, but to challenge and support them to join together and organize for their rights.
- People may be afraid of joining an organization because of historical repression from a government towards people who speak out. Organizations must be empathetic and encourage leaders to participate up to their comfort.
- Although leaders bring diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and experience to a movement, they can unite through a shared interest.
- Organizing is successful when people can say, as a result of my membership and leadership in the organization, my life is better in concrete ways, my community has more power, and I see myself and the world differently.

## Conclusion

As El Salvador's adoption of Bitcoin continues to trend on social media and international investors ponder on their next ventures, Salvadoran families are no longer waiting for their government to prioritize land titles. They are demanding action. The fight for land rights is offering new hope for a different future for El Salvador. Through disciplined organizing, community outreach, and leadership training, COFOA believes they can win and implement a permanent law to resolve the titles for all 350,000 families and pave the way for public investment for water systems, electricity, streets, green spaces, schools, and health clinics.

A campaign that began with thirty local grassroots leaders is now a national movement engaging 7,500 families, attracting national attention, and forcing public officials to take the land title issue seriously. Through RENACER, COFOA has created a diverse base of grassroots organizers and leaders, surfacing many people who have never been politically engaged. The campaign has made it easier for residents to organize in large numbers, speak to the media, and dialogue directly with public officials. Families in the most vulnerable communities in El Salvador are taking concrete action to improve their living conditions and build generational wealth. Along the way, they are beginning to imagine winning non-partisan seats in El Salvador's Legislative Assembly, where they could advance policies that serve the needs of ordinary Salvadorans rather than lining the pockets of the wealthy.



*Transita Rivas-Juarez, Suyapa Cáñales de Faustino, Heidi Zelaya, Marco Antonio Alvarez-Garcia and other COFOA leaders delivering letters to the Municipal Works Department calling for public investments in their communities.*

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