



Indigenous organizing for housing justice: Lessons and challenges

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Magda

Maya activist, Colonia Mario Villanueva in Cancún, Mexico

Abstract

What are the particular challenges to organizing for housing justice in Cancún, Mexico? How has the pandemic altered strategies? In January 2023, anthropologist M. Bianet Castellanos met with Magda (a pseudonym), a Maya activist who was one of the leaders of the quest for housing justice in the Colonia Mario Villanueva in Cancún. Castellanos documented this struggle in her book *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico* (Stanford University Press 2021). This conversation was an opportunity for Magda to provide an update on the status of the informal settlement's longstanding battle to procure formal land titles. They discuss the lessons learned from this decade-long struggle in the hope that this case will resonate and inform housing struggles in other parts of the world.

Keywords

Maya migration, housing justice, informal settlements, pandemic, Cancún

Magda is a pseudonym for a Maya activist from the informal settlement Colonia Mario Villanueva in Cancún, Mexico. She was born and raised in a rural Maya pueblo in the neighboring state of Yucatán, before migrating to Cancún. She has been organizing for housing justice for over a decade. **M. Bianet Castellanos** is a sociocultural anthropologist who teaches American Studies and serves as the Director of the Institute for Advanced Study at University of Minnesota. She has worked with Maya communities in Mexico and the US for the past three decades. Her research centers Indigenous people's experiences with migration, tourism, and urbanism. **Contact:** mbc@umn.edu

Introduction

What are the particular challenges to organizing for housing justice in Cancún, Mexico? How has the pandemic altered strategies? What is unique to the context and what resonates with housing struggles in other parts of the world? For the residents of Colonia Mario Villanueva, an informal settlement located in Cancún, the right to housing has been a long and difficult battle. Residents who settle in informal settlements do not have formal rights to property, even though they have made an informal arrangement to purchase plots from the landowner. Since the state does not recognize these informal arrangements, *colonos*

(residents of the informal settlement) are designated as squatters. In 2012, twenty-two residents sued the landowner of Colonia Mario Villanueva for fraud in an effort to formalize their rights to their land plots. They argued that the landowner had not provided them with proper documentation of their monthly payments. Through this suit, the colonos hoped to validate their rights to their land plots. The landowner countersued; the next decade was marked by suits and countersuits.

Anthropologist M. Bianet Castellanos documented this struggle in her book *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico* (2021). This book examines how Maya families grappled with shifting land and housing policies in the wake of neoliberal reforms that ended land redistribution programs in Cancún, Mexico. Through an examination of Cancún's investment in social housing, this book interrogates how housing and debt (through credit cards and mortgages) are tied to ideas of progress and democracy. Yet the rise of foreclosures and evictions reminds us that notions of progress in Mexico rest on shaky foundations. For Maya migrants, the quest for affordable housing has prompted them to cultivate new strategies for resistance. To avoid foreclosures and evictions, they "wait out" the state and demand the recognition of Indigenous rights in urban spaces.

The focus on Indigenous rights in *Indigenous Dispossession* was inspired by conversations with Magda (a pseudonym), a Maya activist and resident of Colonia Mario Villanueva. In 2015, Magda invited me to document the colonos's struggle to formalize their rights to their land plots. As a young mother, Magda found herself, along with other wives and mothers, stepping in to lead the struggle for land rights in the colonia. Since their spouses worked six days a week in the tourism industry, they were unable to lead this struggle. As a 23-year old Maya woman from a rural Indigenous *pueblo* with a high school education, Magda did not feel prepared to lead, but she also refused to allow her neighbors to be evicted and for her land to be taken away from her. Although the colonia is made up of 100 house plots, most of the colonos know each other and cooperate to provide the colonia with basic services like electricity and potable water. The colonia is organized around a grid but due to informal construction, the forest has not been completely razed, permitting the growth of large shady trees. Families cultivate gardens and flowering shrubs. To save money, houses are built with found materials. Magda loves the sense of community and neighborliness that the residents have established. They share resources from childcare to electricity and the produce harvested from their gardens. This conviviality and the green spaces remind Magda of her Maya pueblo. The colonos collectively hired lawyers to represent their case, but these lawyers either took advantage of them or weren't able to come to a resolution with the landowner.

Inspired by the activism in her pueblo, Magda reached out to Antorcha Campesina, a grassroots political organization that historically has advocated for *campesino* (peasant) rights, because Antorcha had spent time helping the campesino leadership in her pueblo. Antorcha rallied the colonos to participate in marches and sit-ins; leaflet the surrounding neighborhoods; and demand the governor intervene on their behalf. Before this campaign ended, Magda was forced to step away from the campaign because she had an infant to care

Figure 1

A home in
 Colonia Mario
 Villanueva,
 Cancún, Mexico.
*Photograph by M.
 Bianet Castellanos.*



for. Antorcha was able to win some concessions, but only twelve of the families in the colonia benefitted from them. Magda's family did not. For Magda, the struggle for land rights in Cancún was inseparable from the struggle for land rights in her pueblo. Yet, this struggle revealed the limits of Indigenous rights because they are geographically bound to a pueblo. Magda critiqued the fact that these rights were not recognized in Cancún.

In January 2023, Bianet visited Magda to follow up on her case. While sitting in the shade in her backyard, Magda provided an update on the battle to procure a formal land title for the plots that make up this informal settlement. Bianet and Magda began by discussing the challenges involved in this decade-long struggle and the advice she would give other colonias involved in similar struggles for land rights. They also discussed the ways race and gender shaped organizing work.

Lessons and Challenges

Bianet Castellanos: This battle began in 2012. Since then, 22 families were evicted in 2015.

Another 42 families were named in a second lawsuit. Your family was included. How many families remain? And what challenges have you faced?

Magda: Only five families are still here. One is my cousin who is from Yucatán. Another family is also from Yucatán. Two families are from Tabasco. It's been incredibly challenging. The first weeks of the lawsuit were very difficult. It was a new experience. We had to hustle to survive on a day to day basis, especially when the landowner would threaten us constantly. We lived in fear. We didn't sleep. We worried about our neighbors and made sure to take care of each other. We worried because we didn't know when we would be evicted. We worried for our children. We had to focus on what to do in that moment. To think carefully on what to do. How to live under constant threat.

I've done things I never expected to do so in my life. I've slept in front of the governor's *palacio* (office building) in order to protest, to demand that they listen to us, to give us a solution. I've hustled on the streets asking for money [on behalf of Antorcha]. The people who pass by see that you are young and ask why do you need money? "You are young, you can work," they say. We tell them that it's not for us, it's to help other students in Chetumal. [This was one of Antorcha's expectations, that colonos's ask for funds when they leafleted the streets.] Some people respond rudely to you and tell you no. These are the types of challenges that I never imagined I'd take on during my lifetime.

To join Antorcha was another challenge. I did it in the hope that with their support, the government would resolve our problem. Sometimes we spend the entire day, without eating [during the sit-in], through the next day at the governor's office. Some people would drop in to be seen and then leave. If I take a shift to protest, why couldn't they take a shift too? We are all fighting for the same reason. This resulted in many conflicts. I spent an entire week at the *palacio*. I didn't go home at the cost of my personal hygiene. We stayed there because they pressured you to sleep and eat there. We had a stove, an encampment. We stayed there. Some people donated food for us to those of us who remained. We were fighting to be heard. But the governor never came out. He sent his secretary to tell us to end the protest because it was affecting Cancún, creating a poor image of the city. We were told the governor could not solve our problem, that we had to speak directly to the landowner. He explained that they couldn't do anything more because the landowner refused to respond to their requests to meet. She told them that the government could not force her. She behaved very rudely. He told them that they couldn't do anything.

Bianet Castellanos: This must have been so disheartening to hear. What lessons do you take away from this experience?

Magda: I've learned a lot. Enough to even go stand up and shout in front of the governor's palace and know what my rights are and to express what I feel. I too am citizen, but I know that I shouldn't break the law. So it's like keeping a balance. But yes, I've learned not to be afraid to express myself.

Bianet Castellanos: The pandemic was devastating to the tourism industry in Cancún (Castellanos 2023). Over 90,000 service jobs were lost in the state of Quintana Roo. Many people lost their loved ones. How did the pandemic impact your family and your ability to organize?

Magda: It was hard. The hotels closed so everyone had to help each other. We established a bartering system with our neighbors. If one person had two bags of bean, they would exchange it with someone else who had a bag of noodles. We created a group [with our neighbors] on WhatsApp to ensure that everyone had something to eat. We knew everyone because we are neighbors. We heard that other colonias relied on the same method.

We didn't know how we were going to pay our lawyer [since the hotels closed and my husband Iván (a pseudonym) lost the wages he earned through tips]. We had to hustle to

come up with our payment. I had to work in a construction site, cleaning up after construction workers. It felt awful because I had never had to work amongst so many men. But I didn't give up in the face of this dire situation. I found work to help us survive. My husband and I helped each other.

When the pandemic began, I learned to leave [my case] in the hands of the lawyer. To stop protesting. To leave it in the hands of the lawyer and allow the judge to come to a decision. Our current lawyer has told us that this case has taken time, but that it's coming to a conclusion. He reminded us that we've fought for seven, eight years. He said, "If you have endured all these years, it doesn't hurt you to wait a few more months because the case is coming to a resolution. It won't last another eight years. The judge will make a decision soon."

Bianet Castellanos: Colonia Mario Villanueva's case is not isolated. There are over 60 informal settlements in Cancún. When you marched with Antorcha, these protests included other colonias, like Colonia El Fortín. What advice would you give colonias that are fighting similar battles?

Magda: I would tell them to seek out people who really want to support you, who understand you. To avoid lawyers who only take advantage of your case, like what happened to us. They will lose money paying people who intend to take advantage of them. They should look for another alternative and wait until the judge makes a definitive solution. To stay put, to hang in there. And continue to protest if necessary.

Indigeneity

Bianet Castellanos: Not all the residents in Colonia Mario Villanueva are Maya. You and your cousin are leaders of this struggle. You both grew up in rural Indigenous pueblos in Yucatán, which have a long history of insurrection and resistance beginning during the colonial period into the early national period. The Caste War which began in 1847 lasted fifty years and for some Maya pueblos this war is ongoing.¹ How has your experience growing up in a Maya pueblo helped you in this struggle?

Magda: There were five of us who were invited to serve as leaders. We all came from different *pueblos*. Three of us were from the state of Yucatán. One was from the state of Chiapas and another was from the state of Tabasco. We all identified as Indigenous. The leaders from Chiapas and Tabasco spoke their native language. We worked together to support each other.

What we have lived has been shaped by what we have learned from our parents, our grandparents. To be strong, not to give up. To move forward with what is available. But to never, ever give up. When things go wrong, to not give up right away. You always have

¹ The insurrection known as the Caste War began in 1847 in southeastern Yucatán. Maya peoples, along with non-Maya peasants, rebelled against land encroachment and rising taxes, and sought autonomy from the Mexican state. Fifty years later, a peace was negotiated, but for many Maya people, the struggle for autonomy is ongoing. See Gabbert 2021; Reed 2002; Rugeley 1996.

to find a way to move forward, to keep fighting for your dreams, for the goals you want to achieve. That is what makes you feel stronger every day, instead of feeling that you can't go on any further, to believe that there is no other solution. Because there always is. There are other alternatives. The point is to keep moving forward.

Bianet Castellanos: Have your experiences thus far made you change your strategies on how to fight for your land?

Magda: We were treated poorly first of all because we were considered to be ignorant people. No one paid attention to our us. We had to contact multiple people to gain any attention. We were ignored, until we were forced to go away. Because we are Indigenous. Because we didn't know our rights, we didn't know who to talk to.

So yes [we had to change our strategies]. I learned with Antorcha that you have to put pressure on the government until the day you receive the final notice that on this day they will come to force you out. I will respect that day and I will look for another place to live. When there are no other alternatives, I won't be able to keep fighting.

Bianet Castellanos: Your critique of the ways Indigenous rights are curtailed in urban centers is powerful. In past conversations, you have spoken of how you have felt invisible. Has the recent establishment of the National Institute for Indigenous Peoples (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas) by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration created an opportunity to demand recognition? Have you gone to them for help?

Magda: We haven't contacted the INPI, but when we initially contacted the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (*Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas*), we were told that they couldn't help us because their resources were set aside for other projects. More recently, when we met with them again, they told us they couldn't do anything to help us. Once your ID is registered with a colonia that isn't formally recognized, they ask, "Where is this colonia? It doesn't appear anywhere." This issue has created a lot of problems for us. We can't even get a loan from a bank because they tell us they don't know where the colonia is located. They check the location on their computers. As a result, they block you like you don't exist.

Gender

Bianet Castellanos: What's fascinated me is that the leaders for housing justice are women. Indeed, when the landowner evicted the twenty-two families in January 2012, she scheduled the eviction to take place after 3 pm, a time when most of the men in the colonia were at work. It was the women, children, and elderly who bore the brunt of the abuse by the 100 policemen who were enforced the eviction. But what is just as notable is that you and your cousin are Maya women who grew up in a rural pueblo. Indigenous women in Cancún face racial and gender discrimination on a daily basis. What has been your experience as a Maya woman agitating for change? What have you learned? Do you think that being a Maya woman has helped you or hurt you in this fight?

Magda: When I was asked to step in as one of the leaders, my job was to take care of my neighbors. I was asked to be the first line of defense. Well, as a Maya woman, we have a lot of experience. What we have lived, we have learned from our parents, our grandparents. To be strong, to never give up. To move forward with what we have. But never, never give up.

It was an experience to be in charge of my neighbors many of whom were older than me. [Magda was 23 years old in 2012 when the struggle began. She is now 33 years old.] They consulted with me over every problem. We discussed who we should speak to about the problem. I had to learn to live with that kind of pressure, but it was a marvelous experience. I loved listening to my neighbors and consulting with them on how we can support each other. It was a heavy responsibility. My husband helped. He took care of our children when I had to spend the day speaking to lawyers and meeting with government officials. But there were times when he couldn't help and I had to take my children with me.

Being a leader taught me to be aware of what is happening around me. I felt empowered. When I first moved to Cancún, I didn't know how things were done, to whom to seek help from. Everyone told me that I didn't know how to speak correctly, how to speak English. I feel better now. I know how to negotiate this place. And I work with very good people who have made me feel more confident.

I've learned to listen, to think carefully about how to resolve problems. I gained more wisdom. I gained awareness. I feel better about myself to tell you the truth. I have become more intelligent about assessing situations.

I don't think it's hurt me [to be an Indigenous woman while leading the struggle for land rights]. But it hasn't helped me much either because people never listen to us. Not during the initial protest or even when we protested in mass. Like always, they prioritize the people they think are important. Poor people like us when we arrive to ask for aid, to cover our basic needs, we are always treated disparagingly. If they have time, they will see you, but if they don't, they won't. They will tell us to return the next day, then the next day, until we get tired of being turned away.

Bianet Castellanos: You share that your grandparents taught you to never give up. Can you explain the significance of this lesson?

Magda: Yes. When things go wrong, you don't give up right away. You always have to find a way to keep going, keep fighting for your dreams, to achieve your goal. You do this to feel stronger and stronger, instead of feeling that you can't go on. I no longer have another option because there are always other alternatives. The point is to keep going.

Asking To Be Heard

During my visit, I noticed that the lot next to her house was vacant and filled with weeds. Magda told me that the owner had abandoned it during the legal battle. It is no longer occupied. She pointed out the papaya trees that were growing amidst the weeds. Magda

wistfully shares that if she is allowed to stay on her lot, she and her cousin would like to convert this lot into a garden where she could grow fruits and vegetables. Everyone has a garden in the pueblo. A big garden would make her feel more at home. In the meantime, she waters the papaya tree and occasionally weeds the lot.

Bianet Castellanos: As the lawsuit progressed, you and your husband Iván purchased a plot of land in a colonia located on the outskirts of Cancún as a backup plan in case you were evicted. After everything that you have gone through, you continue to live in the colonia. Why is it better to stay than to leave?

Magda: The truth is that I feel love for this land. To leave would be difficult for me. The other plot is far away. It's less accessible. It's kilometers away from the main road. To go shopping for goods is not easy. To complicate matters, there is a lot of vandalism in that area. Several people have been assaulted.

Most of the plots in that colonia are unoccupied. I've heard that it's a dumping ground for the bodies of people who have been murdered. To stay there with my children while my husband works. I feel a little scared to stay alone with my children. And the house is still under construction. The school is five kilometers away. So no, no.

Bianet Castellanos: I can understand why you prefer to remain in a colonia that is surrounded by stores, accessible to buses, taxis, and schools. What advice would give to the government on how to treat people who are fighting for their rights? Any final thoughts that might help inspire others who are involved in housing justice work?

Magda: To listen. As poor people, we need the help the government can give. Most people don't care that we live here in a zone recognized worldwide for tourism. But most of the people living in Cancun, we are people who come from different places to have a better life, things that we never had in our *pueblos*. We don't have a decent place to live and the government doesn't pay attention. It doesn't care about how people live, so long as they arrive to work in the service industry. It doesn't care if people live well, if they sleep well, if they have the basic necessities. I feel that the government doesn't care because the majority of the people who work in hotels are people who live in informal settlements.

Not many people own a home because home prices are very expensive and they are made of cheap materials, with crumbling floors. The houses are poorly made and too expensive to pay off, even in 50 years. Who will live long enough to pay off their home? And the government thinks this is enough. We are offered homes through INFONAVIT (Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores – Institute of the National Housing Fund for Workers) [which provides housing credits to employees and is the largest mortgage lender in Latin America]. But I don't like these homes because they cost too much. I prefer a plot of land where I can build a house to my taste, bit by bit, without the pressure of having to make payments, no matter what.

Hopefully the government will become very interested in the people who live in informal settlements. There are a lot of colonias not just in Cancún, but in various states in Mexico. We are all in the same boat. I believe the government should improve our situations,

improve our lives because we are poor. We'd also like to receive other types of resources, like scholarships for school. These scholarships were taken away from my kids for the same reason that the address on my ID doesn't exist. Since I no longer get this aid, I am obligated to work. My kids get sick all the time. This is why I returned to work. It's better that I work because when I need it, I have a little bit of money.

Once our situation is resolved, it would be great if the government would agree to build a one-room concrete block structure on my lot, like they do in the pueblo. But I think this is a dream.

I have another dream. I would like to go back to school in order to protect my neighbors. I'd like to study a bachelor's degree in law. I feel like I can do it. Experiencing this struggle has shown me how important it is to be educated. To know how to avoid situations where you are seen as not educated. To avoid making decisions based on fear because you don't know how to proceed. Ultimately, I'd like to learn how to defend myself.

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