

ABSTRACT

The Human Geography of Resilience and Change: Land Rights and Stability in Central American Indigenous Societies

Research Problem: Anticipating and predicting cultural “instabilities” throughout the world requires a basic, scientific understanding of complex interactions among human and natural systems that has not been achieved for most of the world. Among the most vital, often overlooked, variables are land ownership and land use, and the related powers that control them. The land itself comprises a fundamental ingredient in the transformational changes that produce societal resilience and instability around the world. Anyone who doubts this principle should consider how many political movements and outright revolutions have been fought over land reform in Latin America. Even today, land ownership and security are the leading cause of political tension in many countries in the region. Understanding land, land tenure, and land use requires the methods and techniques of human geography and cartography to capture and analyze the complexities of human and natural systems. We focus on Central America due to the region’s growing awareness among state governments and development practitioners of the vital role of property rights, with associated natural resources access and use, in economic growth, governance, resource management, and conflict resolution. We focus on indigenous lands where stability is a constant matter of geopolitical concern.

Proposed Methods: We propose to advance the study, modeling, and understanding of land tenure, land use, and political stability in indigenous societies of Latin America. This project will provide a new geospatial way of researching and understanding land tenure in Central America using participatory research mapping (PRM) in conjunction with geographic information systems (GIS).

Anticipated Outcomes: We propose to develop a digital assessment of indigenous areas that display societal resilience and stability and to assess both the perturbing and stabilizing pressures imposed by governance, resource use, and other salient factors. We will document land tenures and land uses, and the related administrative, judicial and legal power over them, as indicators of societal resilience and instability in indigenous areas of Latin America. This research uses participatory research mapping (PRM) and geographic information systems (GIS), together with publicly-available human geographic information, 1) to produce reliable, coarse to fine scale digital geographical data, mapping, and analyses of land use and land tenure regimes in indigenous municipalities of Central America; 2) to define, digitally map, and evaluate the land use and land tenure stability of indigenous municipalities in Central America, developing and digitally mapping a “land stability index”; and 3) to document, digitally map, and rate (using the land stability index) the diverse territorial jurisdictions (“sovereignty regimes”) that Central American States hold over these indigenous municipalities, ranging from historic Indian reserves to semiautonomous regions.

Impact on DoD Capabilities and Broader Implications for National Defense: The proposed research addresses recognized deficiencies in U. S. foreign policy, military strategy, and foreign intelligence. DoD will gain new capabilities to conduct human geographic research, similar to but more advanced than those employed extensively in World Wars I and II. DoD will benefit directly and abundantly from the openly-reported research and the geographic information disseminated and from a greatly improved pool of regional experts, an improved labor pool, and a better informed public in times of future political debates and conflict. An informed public is essential to democracy, and the United States no longer has an informed public when it comes to foreign policy and military strategy. Our purpose is to improve U. S. understanding of foreign lands and peoples and, thereby, to reduce international misunderstandings, provide a knowledge foundation for peaceful resolution of conflicts, and improve humanitarian assistance in case of natural disasters, technological accidents, terrorist acts, and wars.

Submission: This research funding proposal is submitted by the University of Kansas and the American Geographical Society in response to Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) No. ONR BAA # 12-016, Minerva Research Initiative (MRI), Topic Number 2 (Models of Societal Resilience and Change, 2-1 Economic factors, 2-B Energy, Environment, and Resource Factors, and 2-C Other factors impacting societal stability and change). Submitted by Principal Investigator Jerome E. Dobson, President, American Geographical Society and Professor of Geography, University of Kansas (Primary Recipient).