**Poor Water and Environmental Activism**

These two interviews were filmed in the rural community of Milano in Costa Rica in 2011. Xinia Briceño (Environmental Activism) describes a ten-year struggle to prevent pineapple production expanding over community land and contaminating the water supply with agrochemicals used in the production process at a local pineapple plantation; and Eliseth Urbina (Poor Water) speaks about the effects on her and her family of drinking contaminated water.

They are members of ASADA (Xinia is the President) which is the Asociación Administradora de los Sistemas de Acueductos y Alcantarillados Comunal - the Association for the Administration of the aqueduct and canalisation system. ASADA is a member of FENASAPP, a national network of organisations and individuals affected by pineapple production.

They are also part of FONAFIFO, a state agency that issues Certification for Environmental Services and gives forest credits for sustainable cultivation and forest management and which support the ASADA in groundwater management.

Below is a summary of the situation in Milano, and an explanation of some of the technical terms referred to.

The aqueduct in Milano is a water supply system, guaranteeing water supply for rural communities. Its construction and operation is embedded in a national programme started in 1966. The term 'aqueduct' comprises springs, wells, pipelines, tanks and pumps used to convey drinking water to local households.

AyA is the Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (the National Institute for Aqueducts and Canalisation) in Costa Rica. It has the legitimacy to delegate the local water management administration (for drinking and waste water), including the collection of consumer charges, to local residents who are elected in communal meetings for these positions. This group of elected local representatives, which must consist of at least six persons, then agrees on a contract with the AyA in order to be acknowledged as a legal body known as ASADA. Currently, more than 1,000 ASADAs are in existence in Costa Rica.

The work of ASADA is carried out on a voluntary basis. Additionally, each ASADA hires the required professional administration staff for technical and financial management, development, operation and maintenance of the drinking water supply and waste water systems. The organisation works like a small enterprise and depends on the consumer charges for water supply to finance its work and pay the professional staff.

AyA emphasises that management, development and operation / maintenance of the water systems must be carried out "in harmony with the environment". However, this requirement is impossible to fulfil if the ground water is contaminated with pesticides used on agricultural plantations.

These issues of contamination lead to problems for ASADA: If consumers cannot drink the water due to its pollution but are, however, forced to pay for it, civil unrest may arise. This leads in turn to negative consequences for the small enterprise ASADA, who cannot survive if not being paid by the customers.

Already in 2003, the Regional Institute for Studies about Toxic Substances IRET of the National University of Costa Rica had found Bromacil in phreatic water. In 2006, the residents of Cairo, Milano, Luisiana and La Francia (with a total population of 6,000) claimed that pineapple plantations, including the nearby plantation La Babilonia owned by FRUTEX and the Hacienda Ojo de Agua plantation (owned by a national producer), were heavily contaminating the ground water by the use of pesticides. In the following year 2007, the herbicides Diuron and Triadimefon were also found in drinking water.
Consequently, AyA started to drill for new water supply sources which were not affected by pesticide contamination, but wherever they tried to access new sources of phreatic water, it was affected by the usage of pesticides in the pineapple production and had also insufficient capacity due to weak water flow.

Thus, in August 2007, AyA started to supply drinking water with trucks to the rural communities. Residents claimed that a new drinking water pipeline should be built. In October 2008, AyA complied with these claims and promised to build a new water pipeline which should be finished in 2009. But up to now, this remained an unaccomplished promise.

On May 12, 2009, the packing plant of the nearby pineapple farm Babilonia (covering 600 hectares, now property of Del Monte) was temporarily closed by the Tribunal for Environmental Administration (TEA, belonging to the Ministry for Environment, Energy and Telecommunication MINAET). Nearby residents had reported that the packing plant drained waste water at night time over the street along the packing house.

On June 10, 2009, the TEA permitted to reopen the plant under a series of immediate and long term conditions, amongst others the construction of a waste water treatment plant, from which the purified wastewater should be conducted to the storm water pipeline at the main road San José-Limón in order to avoid further contamination of clean water resources (well, becks, rivers) of the land communities.

Three becks and the river Destierro are crossing the pineapple fields of Babilonia. Before the TEA’s intervention, water from the fields, treated with pesticides, drained into these becks and the river without any purification or retention dam.

FRENASAPP reported that a map of existing water resources provided by FONAFIFO (Fondo Nacional de Financiamiento Forestal), a state agency that issues Certifications for Environmental Services and supports sustainable cultivation and forest management and which also offers support to ASADAs for the management of groundwater basins) shows the existence of a spring on the grounds of the farm Babilonia. But in reality, in the suggested place of the spring only a heap of soil could be found. So it was believed that the spring was buried under the soil. Furthermore, the whole area appears as forest on the FONAFIFO map. In reality, however, there are only pineapple plants to find. FRENASAPP was not aware of whether the company had a legal permission to deforest the area and establish the pineapple farm.

The communal residents are engaged in a sharp discussion with AyA, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry for Environment, Energy and Telecommunication on whether supplied water through the rural aqueduct must be free from any traces of pesticides or if a certain amount of pesticides at supposed innocuous levels can be acceptable.

The residents claim that drinking water without any traces of pesticides is a human right that must not be violated. In contrast, AyA and the Ministries believe that innocuous levels of pesticides could be established and would do no harm to human health.

In May 2011, the newspaper El País was informed that a representative from the AyA water laboratory stated in a public conference at the University of Costa Rica that AyA had the intention to permit minor doses’ of Bromacil and other toxic substances in drinking water.

Also over the last years, laboratory results of water samples from the rural aqueduct and the approval of the scientific quality of the laboratories providing results have been widely questioned.

_Helge Fischer, BanaFair, April 2012_