Nicaragua Indigenous Community
Maps Lands to Secure Rights

Miguel Bikan, a little known Miskito indigenous community in Waspam under the Regional Autonomous Government of the North Atlantic in Nicaragua, has finally mapped its territories and through this had settled demarcation of boundaries with neighboring communities.¹

¹ This author and a colleague, Grace Balawag, visited communities of Tebtebba’s partner-organization, Center for Indigenous Peoples’ Autonomy and Development or CADPI, in Nicaragua on October 1-8, 2013. We visited Waspam and Miguel Bikan, both in RAAN (North Atlantic Autonomous Region).
Under the law of the government of Nicaragua, the whole of RAAN (North Atlantic Autonomous Region) is an indigenous territory but its people have to map and demarcate 31 territories and settle boundary disputes between communities.

Miskito leader Rose Cunningham, director of Wangki Tangni, a community development organization concerned with indigenous rights and development, thus helped organize 23 communities of Miguel Bikan to map their lands.

These communities were chosen because they have an existing communal forest management system. They are also a partner of the Center for Indigenous Peoples’ Autonomy and Development or CADPI (as it is known by its Spanish acronym), a research and educational center for indigenous and Afro-descent communities on the North Atlantic coast of Nicaragua.

CADPI is a partner-organization of Tebtebba under the Indigenous Peoples’ Global Partnership on Climate Change and Forests. The mapping activity was undertaken with support of Tebtebba through funding provided by the Climate and Land Use Alliance or CLUA.

To prepare for the mapping exercise, the organizers consulted first the communities—who included the elders, women, youth, church leaders and others—whether or not they would pursue the activity. The elders played a key role in providing stories and historical data of the communities.

Members of the communities finally agreed to collect data on their history, biodiversity, mountain area/watershed, traditional forest management plans and other details, all of which were needed to help substantiate the map.

For six months in 2013, these communities participated in the mapping exer-
exercise, which was also aimed at generating data about the state of their resources. Generated data could also help the communities in devising ways to help mitigate and adapt to the challenges of climate change.

The youth’s involvement during the exercise enabled them not only to become more aware about, but to appreciate more, their culture and traditions. Through the mapping exercise, the elders shared with and inculcated to the youth about how they learned at an early age the importance of protecting the forest from wanton uses. This was an awareness which, the elders stressed, could enhance both ecology and community life.

Through the mapping exercise, the communities in Miguel Bikan were able to set their territorial boundaries and settle boundary disputes with neighbors. Two other communities were also identified to be inside the territory of Miguel Bikan, but the original communities decided to let these two migrant communities stay.

The communities in Miguel Bikan consider the mapping exercise a success, but not without challenges. For example, they have yet to settle other border disputes with neighboring communities.

Today, the communities of Miguel Bikan are seeking help to strengthen their livelihood program and improve their “community school” where they can record, document and keep their indigenous knowledge alive and appreciated. Recognizing the significant role of the youth as the future keeper and user of knowledge, the communities have also outlined a program to revitalize their traditional songs and dances. But they need some support to do all these.

Still, the whole mapping exercise was considered a milestone among the Miskitu in Miguel Bikan. For one, the map the communities produced convinced government to recognize their...
territorial integrity. The map, they hope, would finally put the less known Miguel Bikan in the official map.

The experience has also opened the eyes of other neighboring communities. As they came to know more about Miguel Bikan, they came to know and learn more about the importance of protecting forests and about the urgency of confronting climate change.

The name of the community, Miguel Bikan, and its recent success at community mapping resonates with something familiar—the story about how the community got its name.

A story was told about Miguel, who came to the community and saw its forests and other abundant resources. In no time, he felled trees for timber for his own use and other selfish interests.

The community found Miguel’s acts unacceptable and elders warned him about the wrath of ancestors. If he continued with his selfish acts, Miguel, the elders warned, would be declared “persona non grata” or an unwelcome person in the community.

But Miguel failed to heed the warnings. He continued with his usual selfish ways and went on to exploit the community’s resources. One day, before he could continue to fell more trees, he was stricken with a serious disease, which eventually killed him.

The community believed that Miguel was punished by the gods of the forest. The local folk buried Miguel in the forest and from thereon their community was called Miguel Bikan, which means “buried Miguel.”

The story says that people of Miguel Bikan eventually prospered and their community became more peaceful as they revitalized their lands and forests once exploited by Miguel. But through the years, other outsiders, such as mestizos, continue to threaten the community folk, who have long protected their resources.

They also had struggled to have the government finally recognize their land and resources. With strong resolve, they assert that the community maps they did would finally convince government to help them determine their own kind of development as they cope with current issues such as climate change. (Jo Ann L. Guillao, Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Team)