Collaborative Cartography in Defense of the Commons

GeoComunes
geocomunes.org

GeoComunes is a collective that carries out research and collaborative mapping for the defense of common goods. We understand common goods as all elements that are integrated within the process of social reproduction and which by that form the very fabric of freedom and any possible life in the community.

Our cartographic perspective includes two axes of development. The first one is based on the idea that the Commons' defense requires the investigation and mapping of the territoriality and capital which seek to appropriate the common goods. We are interested in visualizing the connections between the expansion of mega-infrastructure projects and the transformation of Commons into commodified goods. We are also interested in making visible the territorial logic of capital in Mexico: the connections between the expansion of transport infrastructure projects (such as highways, ports and airports) and those of energy infrastructure (gas pipelines, oil pipelines, hydroelectric dams and others), the mega-mining and industry, all over the territory. The second axis is based on the conviction that collectively mapping the common goods (forests, water wells, rivers and so on) strengthens their defense and communal management. In other words: It is necessary to investigate, systematize and share information about the territory that we defend.

We believe in the strength of collaborative work. This is why our methodology includes research, tours, workshops and mapping exercises with urban and rural communities that face some kind of socio-environmental conflict. In defense of their territory they consider collective mapping as a tool in the battle they wage. After being invited, we design, together with the organized community, a cooperation route for the realization of cartographic tools, constructing a collective analysis around the affected regions.

The methodology of GeoComunes is carried out in several stages. The first one is to systematize the information available from official sources, the local press as well as the materials collected by the communities in conflict. This is followed by translating the technical information into cartographic knowledge which makes it possible to easily visualize the spatial dimensions of mega-infrastructure projects. The maps selected in the first stage are proposals that serve as a basis for initiating the cartographic dialogue with the communities affected by such projects.

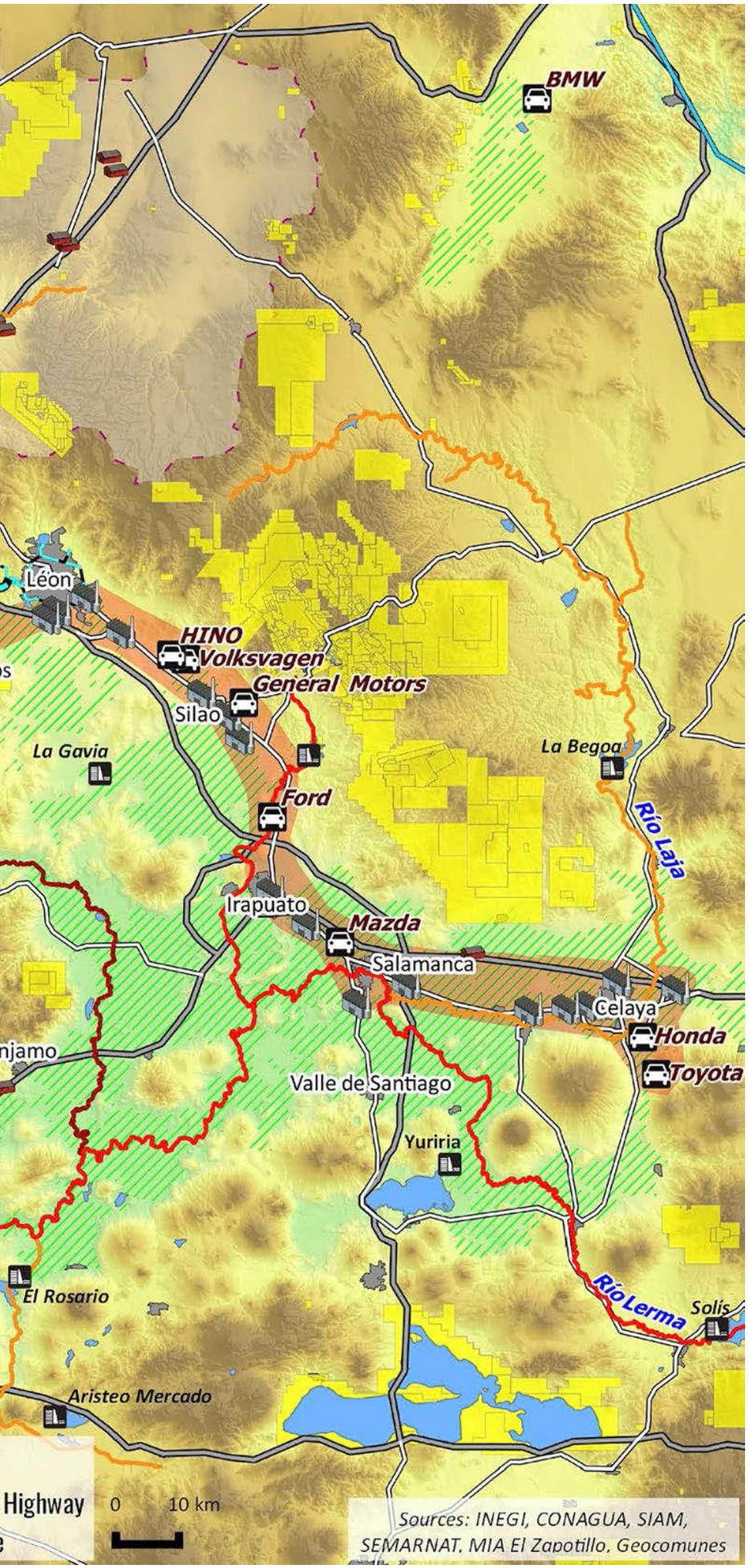
The second stage is developed during workshops and tours, involving the collective construction of maps and intending to localize the Commons graphically. This exercise serves as a medium for the discussion, evaluation and projection of the common territory and the strategies for its defense. During its elaboration we share the knowledge of the territory that the members of the community have.

The third stage of GeoComunes' methodology consists of systematizing the knowledge which was built during the workshops and tours for the digital elaboration of maps, charts, graphs and infographics after they are complemented and enriched by complementary research. The results are digitized for the carthographers, who then meet in the collective mapping workshops we described in the second stage. Once the information is validated by both parties, GeoComunes and the organized community, the maps are printed and distributed to interested individuals, who then become part of the wider collaborative mapping community.

The fourth stage of our methodology involves the use and conversion of collective maps into territorial defense tools. The first users of the collective maps are always members of collective mapping communities. Only after these maps are delivered to communities, the GeoComunes team freely and openly shares the layers and maps and analyzes them on the virtual platform geocomunes.org. This website is central to our work because it contributes to the open access of strategic spatial information and its collaborative construction. Constructed with open source and free access, this GeoPortal, as we call our website, allows anybody to view and download all the elements of our carthography (maps, layers, analyses) and almost all the work that we created for editing and reproduction. These cartographic productions have been used to illustrate news stories, elaborated in direct collaborations with free and independent media. In some cases, collaborative cartography has even contributed to legal cases.

The collaborative mapping work began during socio-environmental conflicts in the metropolitan Zone of Mexico City in 2014, and on the other hand during a national synthesis of various infrastructure projects that helped to contextualize these conflicts. In two years different stages of collective mapping have been exercised in the Bajío region, in the center of Veracruz, south Chiapas, in the Northeast of the country, and throughout Central America. In addition, the participation has taken place in the form of various forums and meetings.

As an example of the work of these years, we now share a series of maps about a dam and water transfer project in the central west of Mexico: the Zapotillo Dam, which has been built to flood the town of Temacapulín and its surrounding environment. We consider that this case illustrates one of the various ways in which the territories in the country are being modified, unleashing a dispute for common goods between capital and people.



There has been the constant intention to modify large-scale metabolisms and water flows in the Lerma-Santiago River basin in Mexico. In the last 70 years a series of dams have been projected onto its tributaries in order to use its water in the city of Guadalajara and now in León. In the region of Los Altos de Jalisco, located between these two cities, water has become a geostrategic resource that is being hoarded by the big companies of Bajío. Dams are the means through which such control is achieved. One of them is the El Zapotillo Dam, which, together with a large aqueduct, is the project which is intended to bring water to the industrial area around the city of León. In effect this will cause the flooding of the communities of Temacapulín, Acasico and Palmarejo.

With this series of maps we want to show that the intention to modify water flows in this region of the country, with all the consequences it entails, responds to the business interests of the export industry in the state of Guanajuato. These materials were constructed while meeting with Temacapulín's organized companions and with the support of other social organizations that accompany the process. The final products were made with the objective of being used in the assemblies of the towns of the region and in information campaigns. This adds to a series of tools that are continuously being generated for the defense and community construction of the territory. The resulting maps show that this region, in addition to being threatened by water deprivation, is suffering from severe pollution generated by industry. Furthermore they show that this project will only increase environmental damage. The Santiago River is an extreme case and paradigmatic of the implications for health and environmental crimes that occur in Mexico.

What can you do about it? How can we stop the progress of dispossession, violence and abuse? In GeoComunes we think that the communal construction of information and the spatial analyses of the entrepreneurs of this affront and their project of private appropriation of common goods is fundamental to building an effective defense. As a collective, our commitment is for life and for its free and communal reproduction. In this struggle maps are one of our tools of organization.

Illustrations

Photograph on previous spread: Mural painting "Freedom – Temaca won't be sold".

The map on the left was originally published in Spanish and has been translated for its publication here.