



# Towards local autonomy and sustainability in Mexico

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**The indigenous peoples in Mexico have become steadily impoverished over the past centuries due to the processes of colonisation, modernisation and international economic integration. But now communities are turning to alternative structures for governance, resource management and production. A research programme at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City is closely collaborating with rural communities to design alternative strategies for autonomous development, in which tradition and modernity are combined. Two examples show how local economies can be strengthened.**

Our world today is polarised between the rich and poor: nations, regions, communities, and individuals. A small number of nations dominate the global power structure, while less privileged nations compete among themselves to offer lucrative conditions to the international corporate and financial powers. Similarly, regions and municipalities engage in self-destructive forms of bargaining, compromising the welfare of their people and ecology in an attempt to outbid each other for 'the fruits of global growth'. But the benefits of international economic integration and free trade do not reach all peoples equally. Large segments actually remain in the backwaters of international progress, or are affected negatively.

In Mexico these problems have their roots in the colonial period. The invaders expropriated the best lands, relegating the indigenous populations to the marginal ecosystems. After independence, the indigenous groups continued to be pushed to the ecologically

fragile zones of the country, such as tropical forests and mountainous areas. Rural communities in general, and indigenous groups in particular, continue to suffer from the political pressure of dominant urban groups.

Poverty forces people to abandon their age-old traditions of ecosystem maintenance, and search for employment outside their communities. The new common market, NAFTA, designed to integrate the economies of Mexico, Canada and the USA, is further encouraging this move away from the land. Presently, two-thirds of Mexico's people, some 65 million, live in urban areas. As a result, rural Mexico has become very dependent on the money sent over by the community members who have migrated. However, the development effect of these considerable remittances is very limited, as they are mainly used to buy consumer goods, many of which are imported.

**Supporting peasant economy**  
Specialised agricultural production

technologies that have emerged from the 'green revolution' have produced vast volumes of food and other primary products. But they have also contributed to environmental degradation and the progressive marginality of peasant and indigenous populations in Mexico. The technology of cultivation of hybrid maize in monoculture, for example, is often too expensive to be profitable, and social and environmental costs are incalculable. Therefore, sustainable development in the marginal regions cannot be in line with the expansion of modern commercial agriculture.

In the present globalised economy, the vast majority of rural producers in the developing world cannot compete on world markets with their primary products, such as coffee, sugar, maize and beans. The international prices are often below the real costs of production, due to the influence of farmers and the government subsidies on these products in the richer nations. Unless insulated in some way, the traditional



Photo: David Barkin

*In the production conservation programme, baseball bats (above) and decorative figures (below right) were produced from wood from thinned and pruned trees, and sold in local tourist centres. New jobs and income in the communities reduced the problem of illegal logging. As a result the forest was regenerated, which also attracted more tourists.*

### Case 1: Productive conservation

Due to the continuous interaction between rural community members and their ecosystem, they have intimate understanding of the natural cycles of their ecological resources. Therefore, their active participation in the reconstruction and preservation of the ecosystems is vital. For this reason a local non-governmental organisation, Centro de Soporte Ecológico, started collaborating with indigenous communities in the Sierra Madre del Sur, a mountain range on the south Pacific coast of Oaxaca province.

Together they embarked on a 'productive conservation' programme. The members of the local communities were invited to reinforce their local leadership structures, and further diversify their production system. A project management model was created, which included various stakeholders: the communities, the NGO, the hotels in the beach resort of Huatulco, and the financing agencies. Production was diversified, for example, by working with the wood from thinned and pruned trees. This material was used for making nice folding chairs, tables, desks, baseball bats and decorative figures, which were sold in the hotels. This generated new jobs and income in the communities, while it reduced the problem of illegal logging.



Photo: David Barkin

Besides regenerating the forest, the project established certain areas for hunting, which protected certain endangered animal species. This also stimulated local eco-tourism businesses. Finally, deep-rooted grasses and legumes that improve soil fertility were used for the regeneration of the agricultural areas in the river basins. This approach offered a way to reaffirm local cultures and consolidate community institutions and processes, rather than imposing the programme of an outside development agency. The process set in motion is now extending, and various traditional and modern products from these communities are now for sale outside the region.

products in developing countries are confined to the narrow markets within their own country and the countries that are suffering a similar fate. By recognising the permanence of this situation, governments of poor countries can take a better position to design policies. Rather than adapting to the globalised system, they can design policies that take advantage of the potentialities of each local system, to

improve the well-being of the marginalised groups in their country.

These policies can create a system of support to the peasant economy, in which communities can thrive without integration into the global market. This is both desirable and urgent. It is not simply a matter of rescuing ancient cultures, but rather of taking advantage of the potential of this important cultural and productive heritage. It is not a

question of 'reinventing' the peasant economy, but rather of joining their own organisations in supporting local solutions to the problems. This implies enhancing their political spaces to exercise their autonomy, and supporting the local ways to guide production for local consumption and marketing.

### Autonomous production systems

In this way a new strategy for rural development is emerging: a strategy that recognises the value of traditional local production practices. Starting with the inherited base of subsistence production, productivity is improved by using agro-ecology techniques. New activities that make use of the local culture and resources base are incorporated. This requires site-specific initiatives and depends heavily on local involvement in design and implementation.

The new element in this approach is the explicit strategy to strengthen the social and economic base of the autonomous production system. Care should be taken not to confuse this with the simple formalisation of the 'war on poverty' or 'solidarity'. The key to the approach is not the mere transfer of resources to compensate groups for their poverty, but supporting rural communities in their efforts to generate goods and services. Besides con-



Photo: José Ángel Rodríguez

*Governments can design policies that take advantage of the potentials of each local system, to improve the well-being of the marginalised groups in the country.*

tributing to raising their living standards it also improves the environment in which they live, thus further enhancing the local resources base.

It is necessary to identify the local possibilities for productive diversification that will permit an advantageous exchange with people from other regions of the country, or parts of the world. If sold to other parts of the world, this often requires 'fair trade' alliances with groups with privileged access to these international markets.

### Political struggle

This process of sustainable development involves a political struggle. It requires a redefinition, not only of what and how we produce, but also of who will be allowed to produce and to what ends. Often the conflict will centre on differences between the poor farmer groups and the local political-economic elite about the use of local resources. The struggle to assure a greater voice to peasants, indigenous populations, women and other underprivileged groups does not automatically lead to more sustainable development. But such broad-based participation may create the basis for a more equitable distribution of wealth, one of the first prerequisites for forging a strategy of sustainable development.

Throughout rural Mexico, increased activity among communities to shape their own alternatives is reported. Clearly, the uprising and progressive consolidation of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has stimulated these efforts. In fact, the immediate effect of the Zapatista movement was to confer renewed respectability to being a member of an indigenous group.

The National Indigenous Congress, representing more than 60 native organisations and 15% of Mexico's population, is supporting local programmes to reinforce traditional organisations and enhance productive innovations. Institutions, such as the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City, are collaborating with communities in their search for new opportunities based on traditional knowledge about resources and ecosystem management. The efforts are focused on supporting local capacities for self-management and production, and broadening the opportunities in regional and international markets.

### Vital local economies

Similar community management projects are springing up throughout Mexico. For example, community forest management projects now encompass

### Case 2: Avocados and pigs

Backyard animal husbandry is a central element in the diversified livelihood strategies of peasant societies around the world. This is threatened by the increasing number of large-scale animal production units by transnational corporations, which tend to take over the market of the small-scale family units. Moreover, the new breeds of poultry and pigs suited to the factory-like animal production conditions are gradually replacing the traditional breeds, which require more time to grow, but are more efficient in processing household and small-farm wastes.

In our search for local sustainable strategies, we encountered the potential of commercial pig raising based on avocado waste in the Purhe'pecha communities in the mountains of west-central Mexico. A local doctor discovered that the avocados in the region, which are produced for the global market, lower the level of cholesterol in the blood of the people who consume them. He used this to develop an effective treatment for arteriosclerosis, a common ailment of rich urban populations. This provided the basis for a university-supported initiative, in which indigenous women started use surplus avocados to feed their own pigs of the local breed, raised in the traditional way.

The feed with high levels of avocado resulted in low-fat meat from the pigs. This new product now fetches a premium price from diet-conscious consumers in regional markets. Some five years later, we can say that this initiative is successful, especially because it focuses on an activity that women have historically managed, and as the men need to seek work elsewhere, the project has struck a particularly responsive chord. At the same time the project has created an opportunity to discuss environmental issues, such as water quality and sewage disposal.

From the perspective of sustainability, another attractive feature of the programme is its limited scale. The volume of production is obviously limited by the supply of waste avocados.

In this way the communities can avoid the health and environmental problems that are usually associated with large-scale pig keeping. As a follow up to this project, the same team is exploring the production of enriched eggs in peasant communities, based on poultry feeds with herbs that are rich in Omega-3, a fatty acid that also reduces the levels of cholesterol in the blood stream.



*Traditional backyard animal husbandry can stand at the basis of a niche markets; in this case pigs are raised with surplus avocado fruits, which results in low-fat meat.*

Photo: David Barkin

more than one-half of the nation's wood resources. Local groups are developing their own production programmes and complementing the protection programmes with ecotourism, artisan production, bottling of water and the sale of environmental services. Most importantly, through these programmes indigenous communities experience the appreciation of their inherited cultural traditions, which are enriched with techniques and lessons from the current era.

A major lesson from this Mexican experience of incorporating traditional knowledge in sustainable regional resource management, is that traditional knowledge and practices need constant renewal, in order to guarantee sustainable livelihoods for those who depend on it for their survival. At the same time the indigenous experiences and organisation are truly a building block for constructing alternatives to globalisation.

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