

COLLECTIVE DEMOCRACY AND COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

The *Indígenas* in Chiapas, Mexico have been engaged in community building for decades, particularly in the Lacandon forest. The people of Chiapas, Mexico have struggled for decades as organizations formed and collapsed as members disagreed over missions and objectives, or were co-opted by elites, representatives of elites, or officials in state and federal agencies. This process created an atmosphere in which hierarchical organizations and government/foreign aid are distrusted. In response, many people in Chiapas, particularly indigenous Mayans, have been seeking to build self-sufficient autonomy through collective democratic governance and cooperative economic development at the family, community, and regional levels. The purpose of this article is to show how the struggle for autonomy and economic survival, which has prompted to undertake democratization and economic development activities in autonomous communities developed by the Zapatistas, help to overcome crisis through practices that serve the needs of the community.

Key Words: self-help, cooperative development, sustainable development, Chiapas, Mexico, sustainable development, democratization

INTRODUCTION

The people of Chiapas, Mexico have struggled to find their place in an increasingly globalized Mexico. This article will demonstrate that the situation in Chiapas has prompted some of the *Chiapanecos* (a *Chiapaneco* is a resident of Chiapas, Mexico, and refers to the indigenous Mayans, or immigrants regardless of when they migrated to the region—essentially, it is a term that includes the people of Chiapas) to begin creating their own autonomous governance and economy that is cooperative, democratic, and self-sufficient. The Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions (RAP) offer an excellent example of the embodiment of these efforts at the community and regional levels within Chiapas. While few have enjoyed direct access to the RAPs, this article engages a number of ethnographic reports made by anthropologists with considerable access to different groups in Chiapas. Access to the RAP communities has become severely limited by the autonomous government. The limits to access to the communities have developed over time and are due to many factors, not the least of which is a concern for the security of the communities and the individuals within them.

The *Indígenas* (*Indígenas* refers to people of indigenous descent) of Chiapas most significant international contact began around 500 years ago with the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Over the following centuries, the *Indígenas* would find themselves subjected to brutality, oppression, and forced acculturation at the hands of their conquerors and their heirs. Eventually, the *Indígenas* would become the farm labor that fed the urban centers of Mexico, working on massive farms and ranches owned by an elite class of *ladino* elites (*ladino* is used in this context as an identifier of *Chiapanecos* who are not part of the indigenous identity). This international exposure left the *Indígenas* struggling to find their own place in the world.

The state of Chiapas is found on the southern border of Mexico alongside Guatemala. It is the poorest state in Mexico despite having significant natural resource wealth. In recent years, it has become the least violent state in Mexico as the war on drugs unfolds in other regions. It consists of over 73,000 km² and includes 118 municipalities in 9 regions. Chiapas has one of the largest indigenous populations in Mexico; of the 4.7 million inhabitants approximately 1 million are identified as indigenous. Explosive growth in population rates since the 1940s has created land shortages in the region. During the latter half of the 20th century, the percentage of the indigenous population in the state has been in decline and emigration is increasing.

The latter half of the 20th century also brought new forms of international exposure to the region. Catholic clergy ascribed to liberation theology and Marxist activists began to teach the *Indígenas* to resist elite oppression. This set the foundation for the 1994 uprising that was an indigenous response to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), oppressive landed elites, and the federal government's neglect of indigenous communities.

The NAFTA threatened to bring a different type of international exposure to the already impoverished *Chiapanecos*. While they had competed in the world coffee markets for decades, the *Chiapanecos* would now face competition for food-related goods. While the large-holder *ladinos* felt relatively secure in their positions in the Mexican and global economy, the indigenous small-holders and semi-subsistence farmers feared that they would be unable to compete with the international agribusiness. This fear, coupled with centuries of oppression and acculturation, created an urgency among the *Indigenas* that would lead to the Zapatista uprising of 1994.

The *Chiapanecos* struggle to understand their own relationship with the outside world, to be understood by the outside world, and to compete in the international agricultural market that threatens the small-holder and subsistence farming communities in Chiapas. The international exposure has had a significant impact on the *campesinos* (I use *campesinos* as an identifier for the rural peasants of Chiapas) and the *ladinos* in Chiapas. It has prompted many changes in local governance among some communities as they attempt to find new ways to cope with economic changes in Mexico, coordinate aid entering the region, and to reduce community dependency upon outside aid.

While many *Chiapanecos* turn to the Mexican government for help during this time of transition, other's have taken their own measures to bolster their communities and families against the significant changes that are sweeping across Mexico.

Some of the communities and, in some cases, members of communities in Chiapas have taken steps toward autonomous cooperative governance that seeks to coordinate development and build self-reliant economic structures. Rather than blindly accepting development programs that address the needs and objectives of the Mexican government, Mexican political parties, Mexican officials, or NGOs and their donors the *Chiapanecos* seek to build self-reliant, sustainable, resilient communities through cooperative economic models and collective decision-making at the family, community and regional levels.

Some development programs fall short of addressing the most pressing needs of the people living in the communities because the goals or methods of the program fail to use a community's existing capacity, or to address the most critical vulnerabilities of the community. Additionally, the need for self-sufficiency prompted by regional vulnerabilities to the global market crisis and competition with international agribusiness has led some communities to identify alternative strategies to cope with change and to take advantage of the growing demand for alternative markets. These include efforts to promote the sustainable development of subsistence agricultural projects, organic farming, collective democratic decision-making processes, and a re-orientation of agricultural production toward local and regional cooperation over competition. This article investigates these strategies through a Qualitative Meta-Synthesis (QMS) research design.

QUALITATIVE META-SYNTHESIS

This article is based on the QMS research design. The design is the synthesis of existing ethnographic and case study research. For the purpose of this research project, five ethnographies conducted in Chiapas were chosen for their applicability to the research question, length of time spent in the field, and access to the communities being explored. QMS seeks to create a more holistic understanding of a situation through the close analysis of a collection of ethnographies and case studies (for more information, please see Sandelowski & Borroso, 2007). The five ethnographies include:

- Bobrow-Strain, A. (2007). *Intimate Enemies: Landowners, Power, and Violence in Chiapas*.
- Earle, D. and J. M. Simonelli (2005). *Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development*.
- Harvey, N. (2005, originally published in 1998) *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*.
- Hernández-Castillo, R. A. (2001). *Histories and Stories from Chiapas: Border Identities in Southern Mexico*.
- Nash, J. (2001). *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*.

Taken together, these ethnographic accounts represent over 50 years of PhD-level anthropological fieldwork that has been conducted since the 1950s. While not all of their time was spent in the field in Chiapas, this sample represents the ethnographers' ability to observe change over time in the communities they studied. This analysis is not limited to the ethnological reports; alternative perspectives, independent verification, and additional information has been collected from various sources. Here, I focus on the cooperative sustainable development activities and collective democratic structures of the *Chiapanecos*.

COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Many *Chiapanecos* are attempting to sever the umbilical cord of development aid that their communities and families have been dependent upon. In this process, they have developed Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions (RAP) that operate as communities in resistance to the locally corrupt political system and officials of the Mexican Federal Government that are perceived as complicit in the corruption.

The development of tax structures, subsistence communal farming with a commercial component, and cooperative economic and development projects are all ways in which the autonomous communities are attempting to become self-sufficient. The *Chiapanecos* do not wish to remain dependent upon outside help. For instance, the ultimate goal of the Zapatista movement is the self-sufficiency and self-determination of the people of Mexico, beginning with the *Indígenas* of

Chiapas. In order to achieve this goal, the RAP communities are aware of the need to diversify their economy, promote self-sufficient economic development, and strengthen their access to markets.

The Zapatistas who established the RAPs are aware that only by demonstrating the successful implementation of a peaceful and effective autonomous collective government and economic system will they be able to build and maintain its legitimacy as a part of the Mexican political system. This is not a small challenge and it has been a long and difficult process to undertake.

The pluriethnic autonomous governing structure places the responsibility for development in the hands of those being developed. This is a significant social and organizational capacity for a community, as it allows for community members, who have the most comprehensive understanding of their needs, to make development decisions that will better address the community's vulnerabilities. At the same time, it limits access to some outside efforts at development as it restricts the control over projects that many NGOs and their donors require.

Prior to the creation of the *caracoles*, NGOs operated in the communities of their choice, and aid was at times divisive rather than beneficial. In the communiqués published by the EZLN in 2003, *Subcommandante Marcos* describes some of the problems inherent in such a system:

In large part, there is a kind of handout even more concerning [than the aid typified in the single red high heel shoe with no mate that was sent to "aid" the campesinos]. This is the approach of NGOs and international organizations that consists, broadly speaking, in that they decide what the communities need, without a thought towards consulting; imposing not just predetermined projects but also the time frame and form that they should take. Imagine the desperation of a community that needs drinking water and they are saddled with a library, those that need a school for their children and they are given a course in herb use. (Earle & Simonelli, 2005, p. 252)

Earle and Simonelli offer a specific example of a development project directed at women in the region, who are becoming a powerful force in the Zapatista movement. The governing structures prioritize the value of women in culture, society, governance, and production; however, as the ethnographies reveal, Western notions of feminist power are not fully transferable to the indigenous culture. The concept of *complementariedad* defies feminist notions of development that are geared toward the empowerment of women alone, at the exclusion of men (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001; Nash, 2001).

Women have become increasingly empowered, but as part of the community, rather than juxtaposed to men. Women hold positions of power and authority equal to men in both the autonomous communities and the Zapatista Military branch. However, development efforts that require participation only by women are perplexing to the *Indígenas'* communities. While discussing a DESMU project

over dinner with some Zapatistas they had befriended, Earle and Simonelli learned about this confusion first-hand. While speaking of an NGO that had helped develop a beekeeping project in one of the autonomous communities, one of the community members related dismay over the way the NGO was not allowing the women to control the funds awarded for the local project, but rather distributed the funds a little at a time. The recipients of this project felt as though the NGO was treating them as subjects, as children who cannot manage their own development. Additionally, the indigenous woman related dismay over the way the project was required to include only women in the operation of the beekeeping cooperative arguing that:

Working with the bees is not easy. The money came to the women, a women's cooperative. We took it of course. But we can't do all the work ourselves, just the women. We never have. We are a community. We need to work together, especially when there are groups of people working against us. Why do [development NGOs] want to divide us so? (Earle & Simonelli, 2005, p. 136)

This example again re-enforces the reasons that the Zapatista communities want autonomy over the development process. The NGOs restrict access to development funds, government agencies direct their development funds to the supporters of whichever political party holds the power and authority at the moment, and some development projects promote community divisions. In particular, projects that attempt to exclude community members for being male are difficult for many in the RAPs to understand. In these communities, alcohol has already been banned, narcotics are banned, and the equality of women is being negotiated within the highest levels of the regional governance, and in the household on a daily basis. It has not been an overnight process, but attempts to divide the community through gender-specific development seems to make the cultural transition more challenging. This is particularly difficult in a collective democratic system undertaking a transition to a regional cooperative economic structure.

The *caracoles* bring a local level of oversight and control to the aid and subsequent development process. This control in turn ensures a modicum of equality and effectiveness. Additionally, the Zapatistas have instituted a 10% tax on any development aid that comes into the communities. The goal is to use the tax monies as a discretionary fund (Earle & Simonelli, 2005). Establishing a tax on development aid arriving in the region is a beneficial endeavor that allows for development projects independent of developing agencies.

However, Earle and Simonelli (2005) do raise an important point about whether or not the Zapatista insistence on control of the development process at the *caracole* level may hinder external development efforts. NGOs that wish to conduct a development project in the autonomous communities would have to organize it through the *caracoles*. The NGO and donors would be unable to choose

the site and specific development project; rather, in an ironic twist, the NGOs and donors may choose from a menu of areas of interest, such as education or healthcare, but the communities would ultimately decide together how best to use the development aid. This level of control, as well as the economic structure created by the tax on development aid, is only feasible if aid continues to arrive in the region. Thus, what is a capacity may also have the potential to become vulnerability, should it diminish external aid because of donors' lack of control over the development project or the recent downturn in the global economy.

In addition to the distribution of development aid, the autonomous regions' governing structures are responsible for the creation of local and regional cooperatives that will promote the development of a self-sufficient economy. For example, the Zapatista communities have developed coffee cooperatives that employ a traditional (not ancient but contemporary tradition) agricultural crop that the *Indigenas* are intimately familiar with. Examples of these include the Yach'il Zapatista Cooperative and the Mut Vitz Cooperative. The Yach'il Zapatista Cooperative consists of about 680 members in five municipalities in the Lacandon rainforest. It produces approximately 130 tons of coffee per year and markets it directly to the United States through an organization called Cooperative Coffees (Tangoitalia.com, n.d.).

The Mut Vitz Cooperative is a group of 1500 Tzotzil indigenous smallholders that includes six autonomous communities in the northern highlands (Tangoitalia.com, n.d.). According to Maria Elena Martinez-Torrez (2006), the Mut Vitz cooperative was able to join the fair trade market in 1999. The price per pound received was \$1.68; the local buyers in the region were paying \$1.24 per pound.

Another coffee cooperative is the Iekil Kix Lejal cooperative in the Municipality Ricardo Flores Magnon. This cooperative is in direct marketing with the Project Café Para La Vida Digna, which sells memberships, and all profits are returned to the cooperative. According to the website for the organization (ZapatistaCoffee.com, n.d.) profits include everything beyond what it costs to purchase the coffee (at a greater than fair-trade price), transport it, and roast, bag, and label it. The municipality has agreed to use all proceeds that it receives from the project to support its health clinic and school. Interestingly, while the larger Zapatista cooperatives boast 100% fair trade and organic certification, the smaller one promises that the principles of these certifications are being followed and that the land has never had pesticides used on it, but claims that the costs involved are a barrier to their ability to gain certification.

The coffee cooperatives have discovered that producing organic coffee and participating in fair trade markets is their key to success. The organic model preserves the ecosystem, and the organic market provides buyers for this niche product (Harvey, 2005, p. 194; Martinez-Torres, 2006). The fair trade movement provides access to markets that would be traditionally unavailable to the *campesinos* and prices that are locally unavailable (Jaffee, 2007). Following this

model, the Zapatistas are bringing other industries into the cooperative model of production. For instance, there are cooperatives that produce arts/crafts, textiles, and agricultural products such as honey and chickens (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Eber & Kovic, 2003; Harvey, 2005).

Promoting the insurance that diverse semi-subsistence farming combined with cooperative production and distribution of products and services provides in the autonomous communities will improve their resilience in the face of economic crises. This in turn could enable economic recovery of the region while preserving the potential for domestic food production that can bolster the national economy in times of global economic crises. Small-holders who produce for subsistence and sell their surplus, or in the case of the autonomous communities, provide their surplus production to the broader community, create a cooperative that goes well beyond production and consumption cooperative models; rather, it is a regional cooperative of communities. This means that some of the autonomy of the individual is surrendered to the community of communities. However, resilience can be derived from this form of cooperative development; in times of crisis, the community of communities can come to the rescue of its members in crisis. Additionally, resilience may also be bolstered by the local knowledge of the *Indígenas* in the Lacandon rainforest.

Many of the *Indígenas*¹ of the Lacandon jungle have developed a “long-tested method of milpa cultivation, one that work[s] within the jungle context” (Earle & Simonelli, 2005, p. 83). Earle and Simonelli argue that this local knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices was critical to the success of Lacandon *ejidos*.² According to Hernández-Castillo (2001), “most of the autonomous municipalities have adopted the proposals of the agro-ecological peasant movement and express the need for sustainable growth that recovers traditional indigenous agriculture and organic agriculture; in this sense, they are against the agrochemical transnational corporations, and they call for economic autonomy so that they can dispense with middlemen and control the means of production and marketing” (pp. 218-219).

Surplus from subsistence farming is provided to the broader community for distribution in areas that have a shortage, or to create revenue for development (Earle & Simonelli, 2005). Similarly, development is distributed based on what the community decides it needs; this is a communal effort that transcends a village, *ejido*, or municipality, and extends across diverse regions and ethnicities. This regional level form of cooperative development is a critical factor in the sustainability of development in the region. The intercommunity effort builds on the capacities and strengths of the community of communities, and as such presents a powerful force capable of overcoming significant crises.

¹ *Indígenas* is used in this article to identify the indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico.

² *Ejidos* are communally held farms. Many of the Pluriethnic Autonomous Communities are within *ejidos*.

The agro-ecological peasant movement is an effort led by indigenous organic farmers in Chiapas. It is intended to support “the inclusion of an agro-ecological perspective and the search for less destructive development alternatives” (Hernández-Castillo, 2001). This demand was one of the results of the State Council of Indigenous and Peasant Organizations (CEOIC) that formed in late January 1994 (Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001).

From the CEOIC grew the movement that would begin applying 10 “Proposals from the Mam and Mochó Peoples to Strengthen the Autonomy of Indigenous Peoples” (FOCIES, 1994, in Hernández-Castillo, 2001, p. 212). The proposals, reproduced in Hernández-Castillo (2001, pp. 212-213), stated the need for the following:

- The right to land, territory, and natural resources guaranteed by land security, and the desire to protect the earth and use the resources while preserving the ecology.
- Production to “yield abundant riches yet prevent the exploitation of humans or the environment.
- Commercialization to be controlled by the producers forming direct relations with buyers and a fair exchange that prioritizes organic farming practices.
- Autonomy in the use of credits for the agricultural process, and not seeds based on the condition of monocropping or pesticides.
- Housing that promotes health yet is respectful to the environment.
- Education that “respects and preserves traditional values and promotes the rescue of indigenous languages.”
- Healthcare “in a way in which we can produce our healthy food and natural medicine. We want traditional medicine to be respected and traditional doctors to be recognized” (p. 212).
- “Democracy, justice, and peace, based on respect for the dignity and culture of our people; and to promote a democratic future. We want to propose the community law to solve our problems, but not on the idea that we all have a good community tradition, but that we must create it” (p. 212).
- Women’s rights: “seek for women the same rights of participation, dignity, and decision as for men” (p. 213).
- The desire for a “broad organization through the common work, which can help us live together peacefully with other peoples and nature” (p. 213).

These proposals reflect demands that are very similar to six critical conditions for postconflict development identified by Junne and Verkoren (2005): security, reestablishment of the rule of law, reconstruction of infrastructure, educational reform, healthcare reform, and protection of the environment. The conditions in the proposals represent the basics of community building and are designed to address development problems and lay the foundations for resilient and sustainable development.

Based upon the ethnographies, it appears that the Zapatista movement is embodying a bottom-up, sustainable development and democratization process. The ethnographies suggest that the desire for autonomous control over the development process, the economy, the culture, and the political organization of communities is helping to build an individual capacity to cope through community, thus improving the community's ability to cope with crisis. This model of cooperative development through collective democratic structures significantly reinforces the resilience of the pluriethnic autonomous communities. The communities are engaged in a self-help process that is a powerful strategy for weathering the global economic crisis and holds the promise that the communities will be able to improve their economic well-being without a reliance on foreign investment, federal aid, or international trade.

The RAP's policy of denying aid from the Mexican government may work until the well of foreign aid dries up; if they choose to use federal aid it would require the abandonment of their autonomy. It is imperative that Zapatista communities deny hegemonic aid, preconditioned with counter-insurgency goals, because it undermines solidarity and community-building efforts, stifles voices, and thus is counter-productive to a resilient community and a democratic society. Whereas the collective benefits members equally and builds solidarity, government programs more typically benefit individuals and promote competition. The question then becomes whether the Zapatistas will be able to build a sustainable economy that is equitable, inclusive, and fair without external inputs such as charitable donations, foreign aid (official and unofficial), and government support.

This is where cooperative development comes into play. One of the most important tasks of the *junta* is to ensure a fair and balanced distribution of development. This means that there is a realistic goal of a health clinic and school in each municipality; everyone has food to eat, shelter, and clothing. The autonomous community teachers and healthcare workers are not paid in wages, but rather in room, board (including clothing, shoes, and food), and travel. This could work to prevent the emergence of a power base comprised of professionals who could undermine the source of authority in the region, but it could also prevent the participation of all but inexperienced and/or under-trained professionals. As emigration from the region increases, it seems likely that the autonomous communities will have difficulty retaining all but the most committed of professionals; this situation will be important to observe as the communities mature. The various communities prepare members to serve in these roles as an effort to improve the resilience of the communities. They need to ensure that the *Chiapanecos* are receiving health and educational benefits that reflect their cultural heritage while preparing their children to better participate in the determination of their own destinies.

COLLECTIVE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The *Chiapanecos* have undertaken the creation of a collective autonomous government that is being negotiated across the autonomous regions. Autonomy, for the Chiapanecos, is not independence per se, but rather the ability to operate a local government that respects the social and political traditions of the *Indígenas* in Chiapas within the fabric of Mexico's legal, social, and economic structures. According to June Nash (2001):

The autonomy that the Zapatistas seek is not the cosmetic autonomy of local rights, but a recognition of regional institutions to resolve agrarian conflicts peacefully and legally, to give men and women (who had always been excluded from the land reform of the 1910 revolution) access to land through the offices of an Agrarian Tribunal that would be funded adequately in order to purchase an expanded ejido. This would provide the material base for autonomy. (p. 147)

The Zapatistas seek legal avenues for land redistribution that fall squarely within the Mexican state's legal system. This is a critical point of indigenous autonomy in Chiapas: the Zapatistas do not seek a state of their own within a state, but rather the ability to control the development process in their communities, and the self-sufficient means to fund this development effort. Earle and Simonelli (2005) reinforce this point:

Both the EZLN and Non-Zapatista civil society have struggled to define and implement alternative models of development and governance using administrative practice derived in part from indigenous customs. In theory, for the poor of Chiapas, autonomy means local and regional control of governance, resource extraction, development processes and projects, education, and health care, in a system that runs largely independent from the official Mexican model. Entwined in this are attempts to build self-sufficiency and revitalize the economy. (p. 8)

Hernández-Castillo made a critical observation in her ethnographic research in Chiapas. She found that in regard to autonomy:

The positions within the indigenous movement are not homogenous either. Historical and regional differences have created different proposals: for the Lacandon rain forest colonizers, who came from different parts of the country and state, autonomy has to be multi-ethnic, while Sonora Yaquis demand the creation of a Yaqui autonomous region; as for Oaxaca indigenous peoples, they still seek communal autonomy. (Hernández-Castillo, 2001, p. 218)

The picture of autonomy that is built from the ethnographies as a whole is one in which the claim for autonomy espoused by the *Indígenas* differs in form and function by region and experience (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001; Nash, 2001). Historical, economic, and political

differences seem to be factors in the form and function of autonomous communities in Chiapas, as well as the level of success the PRIistas and the Mexican government have had in co-opting or oppressing indigenous organizations at various stages. However, there are commonalities among them, most notably the goals of improving social, economic, and political dimensions of life for the *Indígenas* and *campesinos* in Chiapas. Additionally, the autonomous communities seek control over the development process in their communities. They wish to be the ones to make the decisions of what development projects they need, what timeframe these projects should involve, and how the projects are implemented (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001; Nash, 2001).

The autonomous communities in all their manifestations represent a commitment to the ability of a community to govern itself without leaders (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001; Nash, 2001; Speed, 2008). All members of the community participate in decision-making, and also serve in the rotating leadership positions designed to prevent oligarchy or co-optation. In essence, all members of the community are leaders.

Autonomy in the Zapatista communities is founded upon the idea that space be made in the Mexican government to recognize the government of the communities, and their governing structure. Not independence, but rather a recognition of local and regional government that is collectively democratic. This places authority and control over the development process with the people who live in the community or region being developed.

Rus, Hernández-Castillo, and Mattiace (2003) explain that the degree to which the Zapatista communities renounce the services of the Mexican government depends upon the success of the autonomous government in developing governing structures such as law enforcement and judiciary, tax collection, and civil registry procedures (p. 208). In particular, one region—*Tierra y Libertad*—was very successful in gaining autonomy prior to the development of the Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions in 2005. According to Arecli Burguete Cal y Mayor (2003), the region of *Tierra y Libertad* was an “outstanding example” of a successful autonomous government. During its dismantling by the Mexican military it was discovered that it had public offices, meeting places, a civil registry office, a courthouse, and a jail (Cal y Mayor, 2003, p. 209). *Tierra y Libertad* was developed in the Lacandon rainforest; its seat of government was in the *ejido* Maparo Aguantita. This region had experienced significant immigration during the colonization of the rainforest in the 1970s and 1980s. The region is inhabited by the Tojobals, tzotzils, Ch’ols, Mams, mestizos, and Guatemalan and Kanjobal Mayans (Cal y Mayor, 2003, Jung, 2008). This ethnic melting pot became the heart of the Zapatista experiment in collective democracy embodied in the *Caracoles* and *Juntas de buen Gobierno* that have become the collective democratic structures that demonstrate the potential to build upon the existing community capacity and represent community level cooperative development. Despite the dismantling of the “capital” community, the RAPs continue to operate

due to their horizontal structure. This horizontal democratic structure is the foundation for the resilience of the RAPs, when one community experiences crisis, the rest are capable of continued operation and are able to respond to the crisis. This is in part due to the decentralized form of democratic governance, and in part due to the communal nature of the economic development.

DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES

The democratic structures supported by autonomy and demonstrated in the Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions offer an avenue for sustainable development and self-sufficiency in the region through cooperation across class and culture. The collective form of democratic decision making in these communities allows for the development process to proceed more fairly as consensus among the members of the community and the region must be reached before a project is undertaken. These democratic structures that direct the government and economy of the RAPs finds its roots in decades of activism and centuries of Mayan culture.

According to Nash (2001) and Harvey (2005), the communities in which they began ethnographic work in the 1960s and 1970s were group oriented. Nash (2001) explains that communities were organized around municipal centers. The rural areas surrounding these centers were the responsibility of the urban center; often these urban centers were *Ladino*-dominated enterprises that were predatory on the rural communities surrounding them. The government in these urban centers would sometimes force the rural *campesinos* to use their subsistence plots to grow commercial products. They would cheat the *campesinos* when they brought goods to market, and restricted the land distribution policies promised by the constitution of 1917 (Bobrow-Strain, 2007; Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Hernández-Castillo, 2001; Nash, 2001). These municipal governments, which had once been cultural centers for the *Indígenas*, had been taken over by *Ladino* elites, and the *Indígenas* found themselves excluded from participation in the urban government. Democracy in Chiapas was not only one-party for 70 years, but was dominated by an ethnic and economic class. In response to this, the Mayan *campesinos* seek governance that is balanced and fair.

Harvey (2005) observes that “the novelty of the EZLN is . . . to be found in its political organization, strategy, and objectives, rather than in its social base or material conditions” (p. 228). The Zapatistas have organized their autonomous communities very horizontally. They more closely resemble networks of communities that base decision-making in community consensus. In the horizontal organization of the Zapatista community’s authority, decision-making power and responsibility for the accountability of leaders rest squarely in the community population, not through representatives, but through community negotiation to consensus.

The governing structure of the Zapatista autonomous region is organized into three branches: autonomous community councils; the *caracoles*, which serve

as seats for the *juntas de Buen Gobierno*; and the *commandancia* (Earle & Simonelli, 2005, pp. 260-274; Speed, 2008). While the role of each of these branches is continually negotiated, what remains is a commitment to consensus seeking and collective democracy.

The branch of the autonomous government wherein authority for decision-making lies is the level of the autonomous councils. The councils are located within communities and are comprised of the entirety of the community. They are what the Zapatistas refer to as the Base. The councils elect leaders who represent their decisions, not them, at the *Juntas*. In 2007 there were 30 Zapatista Communities sending delegates to 5 *Juntas* (Speed, 2008). Earle and Simonelli (2005) postulate that the Zapatista's representative form and universal participation have a significant "interactive effect, as each hears the others and sees how they represent the whole" (p. 261). They call this "evolutionary revolution," as the rules and relationships are constantly negotiated as issues present themselves. Basically, the communities make no decision on a matter until it becomes an issue that must have a decision.

Juntas function within a consensus system. Each autonomous municipal council elects eight people to serve as representatives to the Junta; the elected representatives are on a rotating schedule, with two serving as spokespersons at any given time. They cycle through in such a way that the post of representative is more important than the individual filling it. Decision-making is achieved through universal participation at the community level, and the representative's job is to relate decisions to the *Junta*, rather than make decisions on behalf of those they represent. In the *juntas*, the two spokespersons join representatives from the other communities. The *Juntas* themselves have a spokesperson who serves for 2 weeks, then spends 98 days listening to the other seven council members (Earle & Simonelli, 2005).

The *Juntas* are an attempt by the Mayan peasants to build resilient communities that are collective and able to recover from calamity relatively quickly. The *Juntas* are responsible for local governance and sustainable development. Through this process, they are intended to prevent the development of urban centers that neglect rural areas. The *Juntas* are intended to manage agrarian activities in a way that ensures the local availability of food through cooperative small-holder and subsistence farming projects aimed at food production with a surplus as opposed to commercial monocropping. Robert Netting (1993, p. 891) found, in his analysis of the relationship between farm size and productivity per acre in agriculture around the world, that small-holder farming is more efficient at producing per acre yields than large farms. This finding suggests that promoting community development from the bottom up and decentralizing production of agricultural goods may not only increase production, but also promote much more resilient communities. A community that is able to produce its food locally, and provide for its needs based on local information, as opposed to administrative direction and prescription, will tend to be able to recover from calamity more quickly.

In Zapatista autonomous zones, prices and wages are established in a municipality by a price and salary board that includes representatives of the peasants, workers, business owners, farmers, ranchers, and the local *Junta*. Their task is to set prices and salaries such that prices for necessity items do not exceed the salary of the lowest paid worker. They are also tasked with the distribution of pension benefits and disability/senior care, as they are the closest to the community and know best how to distribute these benefits.

Essentially, the *Juntas* have been charged with the important and challenging task of building upon the resilience of the *Indígenas* to build resilient communities, through sustainable development, autonomous governance, and collective democratic decision-making using little to no resources. The degree of their success at this endeavor is central to the determination of whether localized decision-making in development matters is feasible as a more global peace-building and development strategy.

The smallest branch, the *comandancia*, is comprised of members of the EZLN military structure. They serve for as long as the collective communities perceive that they are working in the best interest of the community; they can decide to step down and retire, or the members of the collective communities can decide that the military branch of the government is no longer necessary and vote to have it disbanded. The *comandancia* are chosen by the ranks of the military arm, but are not decision-making entities; their role is to maintain the military and to mobilize that military if called upon by the collective communities (Marcos, 2007). More significantly, they have the responsibility of serving as the official voice of the communities in the communication of community decisions, goals, and demands to the outside world. While the leadership in the *comandancia* does not rotate as often as the other tiers of governance, it is not a position of indefinite service.

Again, leaders in the organization do not make decisions and inform the people of these decisions; rather, decisions are made through consensus at the community level in the *Juntas*, then through the elected leaders these community decisions are related to the *Caracoles*. This process of consultation and consensus ultimately results in a collective decision-making process for the entire group of communities. Leaders are more like messengers; they carry the decisions arrived at by the collective members of their home community to the community of communities, and back and forth until consensus is arrived at within the community and region. As Rothschild-Whitt (1979) emphasizes in her model of collectivist democracy, the goal of these consensus-building processes and the rotation of leadership is to prevent the emergence of oligarchy, the possibility of leaders seizing effective control. This ultra-democratic form of governance is particularly aimed at reducing inequities among autonomous communities and ensuring that each individual and community continues to have a voice in the decisions that will affect their lives (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986).

The *caracoles* also serve as the judiciary in the communities. This form of community law is established and enforced by the community at large rather than a

hierarchical structure, and works to prevent the domination of any one group through accountability to the broader organization and to the EZLN *comandancia*. The creation of the *caracoles* represented an attempt by the EZLN to distance the military organization from the Zapatista communities in peaceful resistance; however, preserving the authority of the *comandancia* seems to indicate that there is some remnant of vanguard politics, in which a small group ensures that the other levels of governance get along and maintain the mission. Nonetheless, despite the continued negotiation of the authority of the different branches, the Zapatistas have embarked on a project that situates power and authority in the hands of the community.

Earle and Simonelli (2005) observed the interplay between the different levels of autonomous governance in Chiapas first-hand. As they sought both informed consent from Cerro Verde, and permission to conduct research in an autonomous community from the *consejo*, or municipality, they noted the numerous meetings and consultations that had to occur at each level of governance in order to come to consensus: “What was taking place in the meetings was the fine tuning of the daily details of autonomy, how it is ‘operationalized’ as a concept in the face of the need for communication, compromise, and consensus” (Earle & Simonelli, 2005, p. 164). One of the Zapatista representatives, named Luz (quoted in Earle & Simonelli, 2005, p. 164), commented that:

It’s not easy at times here,” she said. “We have to make sure we are doing things right on all levels. On the level of the pueblo . . . the community; on the level of the Consejo . . . the municipality; and on the level of the *comandancia* . . . the Zapatista leadership. We spend a lot of time talking.

This consensus seeking is an important component of the indigenous conceptions of democracy and development, which are closely intertwined in the autonomous communities. Development efforts are controlled by the *caracoles*, which operate much as the municipal centers of the *Indigenas* in the 1970s; however, at both of these levels of governance, there is a rotating leadership of community members.

The Zapatistas’ most recent conception of democracy, embodied in the *caracoles* and *Juntas*, is still in its infancy, and it is too soon to judge its success (Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Nash, 2001). However, the *caracoles* are making an effort to create a political space where all voices are equal, development is determined, implemented, and maintained by the community, semi-subsistence agriculture is a goal, and men and women of all ethnicities participate in the consensus based decision-making process. Within this democratic space lies the capacity to find a resolution to the conflict. Not because it is being done by the Zapatistas per se, but because it is democratic, is concerned that development rests in the hands of the community and not government agencies, NGOs, or their donors and sponsors, and is inclusive rather than exclusive.

The Zapatista communities represent a democracy of people rather than an organization in the traditional sense. Provided these democratic structures persist, the Zapatistas represent an ideology of governance as opposed to a governing group. This gives them considerable legitimacy, as they are not a group that seeks to take power, but rather represent the complete divestment of power and authority to the local community. It is within this collective form of governance that the seeds for peace lie.

Essentially, the Zapatistas have centralized all economic, political, and social dimensions of life in the autonomous zones into a decentralized collective democratic organism that has, as a key component, the rotation of authority, and has maintained itself since 2003. Only time will tell if it can withstand the waning interest of civil society and the ebbing tide of foreign aid.

CONCLUSION

The Zapatista communities in Chiapas have developed an organization that is at once a collective democratic governing system embodied in a community of communities and also a diversified cooperative of cooperative economic structure that seeks to preserve ecological viability, prevent over-development of urban centers at the expense of rural *campesinos*, and support democratic mechanisms of governance that operate through consensus instead of hierarchy. While this structure may be challenging (though not impossible) to implement in a huge metropolitan area, it can certainly serve as a model for rural development and democratization not only in Chiapas, but also in other parts of Mexico and beyond. Additionally, it can contribute to the larger economic goals of the country. Additionally, this model may contribute to the development of sustainable peace in areas experiencing low-intensity conflict.

The communities in resistance are seeking an autonomous path to the development of culture, society, and community that will enable them to build an identity that is both indigenous and Mexican at the same time—an identity that values subsistence agriculture, sustainable forestry, and is a part of the Mexican political and economic system—one that is situated in communities where Protestants, Catholics, *Indígenas*, and *mestizos* live out their lives in their own way, but as a part of a wider community, that is in turn a part of an even wider community of communities that is situated within the political and social fabric of a state.

The democratization and economic development activities undertaken by the autonomous communities developed by the Zapatistas reflect the desire—and the capability—to overcome crisis through practices that serve the needs of the community, rather than the needs, desires, or goals of the developing agencies, the Mexican government, or international organizations. The autonomous communities are founded upon equality, liberty, dignity, and sustainability.

The federal government is very wary of the idea of autonomy in any region of Mexico and has raised the specter of secessionist motives. However, there is no

evidence that the Zapatistas wish to become secessionist. The rhetoric of the Zapatistas has remained nationalistic. Even after the failure of the federal government to honor the San Andres Accords, the Zapatistas have maintained their nationalistic perspective. Despite the militarization of the region and the incidents of paramilitary violence, assassinations, and violent evictions of *campesinos* from land they took over in response to the abandonment of land reform in Chiapas, the Zapatistas maintain their position as a Mexican rebellion, not an indigenous uprising that prefaces an attempt at secession.

The economic gains that this autonomy has allowed the RAPs to develop include the creation of cooperative economic development that spans multiple communities and regions. This diversity allows for the communities to weather crisis, and to create an atmosphere that enables self-sufficiency, helps protect environmental security, and ensures equitable distributions of the economic benefits gained by the community of communities.

By taking advantage of growing global demand for organic and fair trade coffee, the cooperatives in Chiapas have been instrumental in the economic development model for the RAPs. Building upon this cooperative model, the RAPs have begun organizing other local industries around the cooperative model. Beyond that, the communities had organized the re-distribution of the economic gains around a cooperative model. Sustained and facilitated by the collective governance of the RAPs, this redistribution system is an attempt to create self-sufficient communities that will no longer require outside development assistance, whether that assistance be in the form of government programs, foreign aid, or NGO projects. Meanwhile, the communities still seek restitution from companies that seek to extract natural resources from the region. If the communities were to win the rights to even a modest form of reinstitution for resource extraction within specific geographic boundaries and have those funds placed in the control of the collective democratic government, the economic gains would exponentially increase the ability of the communities to become self-sufficient and resilient. It may also provide a means for the broader state of Chiapas to move beyond poverty and into a sustainable system of government, economy, and environment.

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