

The Sustainable City Project Ruse in Chiapas

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The “rural city” of Nuevo Juan de Grijalva is part of a [federal and state project](#) which claims that it will reduce poverty in the Mexican state of Chiapas by relocating impoverished rural communities into centralized cities built by the state government. Currently, 74% of towns in Chiapas contain fewer than 100 inhabitants. This dispersion, combined with a high level of economic vulnerability, presents major obstacles to the provision of “basic services and attention to health, education, infrastructure, healthy living conditions and employment,” according to [report](#) by the state government.

The Sustainable Rural Cities Project, however, is part of the larger neoliberal development plan, the Plan Puebla-Panama, that was initiated in 2001 with the stated goal of integrating and developing the economies of the Meso-American region. Mexico’s president Felipe Calderon expanded Plan Puebla-Panama under a new name, the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project, in spite of broad based resistance within the region. The Nuevo Juan de Grijalva project has followed this free market, monoculture, and agro-export model since its 2008 inception and it has undercut the subsistence farming practiced by most of its residents. As farmers can no longer cultivate their land, unemployment has risen, and the costs of basic services have quadrupled, there has been a significant and building local resistance to the project.

The relocation of indigenous communities into centralized cities is not a new phenomenon in Chiapas. Constitutionalist General Salvador Alvarado, who fought under the command of Venustiano Carranza during the Mexican Revolution, relocated Chiapan communities into “strategic hamlets” during the Revolution in order to better control them. Many dissidents within the region feel the same desire for control is motivating the relocations today.

“It is clear that this plan is about forcing us to abandon our lands and for international companies to occupy them and once we are concentrated [in one centralized city], they can control us and force us to grow other crops that is not the milpa ...,” [wrote residents of Chenalhó](#) in an open letter to the state government. The milpa is a farming technique commonly used in indigenous communities in Chiapas that involves farming corn, beans, and peppers or squash together.

Indigenous communities function outside the neoliberal economic system which is based on the production of goods for export. From the perspective of the Mexican state, indigenous communities engaged in subsistence farming are valueless and must change, argues Mariela Zunino of the Centro de Investigaciones Economicas y Politicas de Accion Comunitaria (CIEPAC). “It is a racist state vision that is trying to end indigenous traditions,” said Zunino.

The Nuevo Juan de Grijalva project was initiated in 2008, a year after massive flooding washed away the homes of 1,200 families in the region. Residents of Juan de Grijalva and ten other communities were relocated. The city provides housing for 410 families. The houses are designed in a cookie-cutter fashion measuring 59.80 square meters on a plot of 300 square meters. They are constructed out of adobe with aluminum roofs and have access to running water and electricity. The houses’ layout includes two bedrooms, a bathroom, and living room.

“Each resident was given the choice to keep small livestock such as chickens or grow plants,” reads [areport](#) published by the University of Michigan. Yet one resident of Nuevo Juan de Grijalva interviewed by CIEPAC, [explained](#) that it is impossible to keep animals, such as chickens, given the small sizes of the backyards and their close proximity to the houses.

While some residents choose to keep land in their communities of origin, others are strongly pressured by the government to sell their lands before relocating, according to Zunino. “Here what we eat we have to buy. We can’t produce to eat. We don’t have land anymore,” said another resident interviewed by CIEPAC. As Zunino highlights in a [radio interview](#), this arrangement is advantageous for commercial food outlets — such as transnational Bimbo bread company — that sell their products in the city’s stores.

Rather than supporting self-sufficiency, the state encourages residents to plant fruit trees or a single high-yield crops for export, such as tomatoes. According to Zunino, some residents of the rural cities are permitted to keep their land but forced to grow in accordance to state demands. “If I plant my seven hectares with trees what am I going to eat?”

One tree takes three to four years to produce fruit,” said a resident interviewed by Radio Zapatista. There are strong arguments against the use of monocultures, the practice of planting a single high-yield crop. For example, monocultures have more disease and pest problems, and compete with one another for the same limited resources. This requires concentrated use of fertilizers, explains Kristina Jones, who teaches biological science at Wellesley College.

Moreover, this type of farming undercuts traditional farming practices in southern Mexico, such as the milpa, which are advantageous for their ability to minimize the risks of farming in non-optimal environmental conditions. “Corn and beans work well together, as corn requires a lot of nitrogen, and beans partner with special bacteria to make more nitrogen available in the soil,” says Jones. “The beans can climb up the corn stalks and therefore don’t need staking.” Squash reduces weeds by covering the surrounding ground. Also, the cultural value of corn to Chiapan indigenous communities cannot be understated. For the Chiapan Mayans corn is not only something to eat; it is also a crop to celebrate and remember, and the primary connection to the natural world.

However, from the Mexican government’s perspective, dislocating small-scale farmers frees up large tracts of land that can be sold to large agro-businesses or mining companies.

Because Nuevo Juan de Grijalva has high levels of unemployment, reaching about 40%, many residents are forced to commute long distances to their old communities to continue farming. Such a commute costs about US\$1.50 per person, a significant expense for farmers without jobs in the city, according to residents interviewed by Radio Zapatista.

For those residents who find employment within the community green houses, the pay is described by Nuevo Juan de Grijalva residents as too low to sustain a family. “It doesn’t even give you enough for food,” said one resident interviewed by CIEPAC. The lack of jobs and poor wages make it difficult for residents to feed their families, whereas in their old communities they farmed or fished for their food. “It is supposed to be a sustainable city but we can’t even sustain ourselves,” said residents interviewed by Radio Zapatista.

Residents of the town appear satisfied by the proximity of certain social services within the rural city, said Zunino. Access to those services, however, is limited due to the high demand and cost. Residents say it is often easier to contract a private doctor than to visit the local clinic given the long wait.

The next rural city to open will be located in Santiago del Pinar, near the Zapatista caracol or self-governing center, in Oventic in the Chiapan highlands. One fear is that this community will serve as a paramilitary stronghold used to undermine local indigenous autonomy. Chiapas has a long history of paramilitary activity, especially in this area where in 1997 a paramilitary group massacred 45 indigenous people in the community of Acteal.

With the tenure of Chiapas Governor Juan Sabines coming to an end in 2012, it remains to be seen whether the rural cities project will continue under subsequent governors. Given that an estimated 88% of the funding for rural cities comes from the federal government, however, Zunino considers that the project will continue in spite of any potential political changes in Chiapas. Yet, say the dissident residents, the rural cities project fails to resolve the major issues afflicting Mexico, which include poor wages, unemployment, and inequality, while threatening indigenous autonomy and culture.