

Zapatista Development: Local Empowerment and the Curse of Top-Down Economics in Chiapas, Mexico

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Guaquitepec is a small village in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico and by most estimates the poorest in the country. It is a humid, tropical area perhaps best known for the large-scale rebellion staged two decades ago by a leftist revolutionary group called Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), or as they are more popularly known: the Zapatistas. The famous Zapatista revolution dramatically impacted Mexican culture and politics, and in villages like Guaquitepec, its influence is still widely felt, and its legacy on the state of Chiapas has yet to be determined.^[1]

The Zapatistas initially attracted a wave of local and international attention for their cause; as a result, Chiapas received an influx of development aid following the 1994 rebellion. The state currently has the second-highest number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and development organizations in the country. Yet even with all the aid, little has changed in fifteen years. While the Zapatistas secured a degree of autonomy from the Mexican government, very little progress has been made and the underlying sources of conflict remain unaddressed.

Today, the Zapatistas—representing a broad political culture of workers, teachers, students, and farmers and having a wider support base than the initial mid-1990s political-military apparatus—continue to move away from government programs, maintaining their independence from the state. Some argue that this self-imposed isolation has limited the political influence of Chiapas and hampered economic progress. Others highlight the alternative political and social structures that emerged, arguing that the Zapatistas actually missed a significant opportunity to truly reform the state for the better.

Visiting a village like Guaquitepec, one notes that the community embraces an alternative model of development, centered on sustainable economic and social practices. The community has developed its own unique market structures and agro-ecological systems. Students in Guaquitepec's community-based schools are trained in traditional, family-given agricultural practices; classes are taught in Tzeltal, their mother tongue; and indigenous cultural norms are practiced extensively. High school graduates are placed in jobs within the community rather than migrating to cities, which preserves a sense of kinship and counteracts "brain drain." Guaquitepec represents a practical success story of the unique Zapatista ideology of self-reliance; other villages across Chiapas present a less rosy picture, as will be discussed. While Chiapas has undergone massive political, economic, and social transformations since the Zapatista revolt, the impact is perceived as limited in indigenous minds.

As Mexico moves forward, the future of Chiapas and the role of the Zapatista political paradigm remain uncertain. On 1 December 2012, newly elected president Enrique Peña Nieto took up his new mandate. He is a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the same party that ran the

country for nearly seventy years, under whom the Zapatistas revolted in 1994. What Nieto's rise to power might mean for the Zapatista ideals of self-autonomy and independence from the state is impossible to predict; this article explores the unique nature of development and community building in Chiapas at this crucial and uncertain moment in its history.

“Para Todos Todo”: The Zapatistas in Context

The EZLN emerged as an antiglobalization, anti-neoliberal social movement in Chiapas in the early 1990s, seeking indigenous rights over land and other local resources. Land reform was a key demand, since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) eliminated the guarantee of land reparations to indigenous groups, which had been mandated by the 1917 Mexican Constitution.[\[ii\]](#)

The Zapatistas believed that NAFTA would increase the gap between the rich and poor. Apart from opening the Mexican market to cheap, mass-produced, U.S. agricultural products, NAFTA would significantly reduce Mexican crop subsidies and affect the income and living standards for many southern Mexican farmers, making it difficult for them to compete with heavily subsidized imports from the United States. For the Zapatista rebellion, this became a critical opportunity to demand for greater democratization of the Mexican government and a stronger representation of the needs of the indigenous people.

The revolt—led by an estimated three-thousand insurgents marching into towns and cities in Chiapas—was quickly subdued by military forces, eventually leading to negotiations between the government and the Zapatista leadership. A major impact of the rebellion was the mass media campaign that put an international spotlight on issues facing the people of Chiapas. Development assistance came pouring into the state; the EZLN received significant notice from a variety of NGOs and organizations, as well as from broadcasts in both leftist and mainstream media outlets. International human rights organizations came to San Cristóbal De Las Casas, a colonial town in the highlands of Chiapas, to monitor possible human rights abuses by the army.

However, high international prominence and the increased flow of funds and human resources into the state have not translated into improved livelihoods for local communities. The prevailing paradigm of development in Chiapas during the 1990s was premised on neoliberal principles and failed to engage in meaningful consultations with local communities over their land and resource issues. The dominant development narratives effectively sidelined the indigenous demands that had been embodied by the Zapatistas.

Ideologically, the Zapatistas advocate for an alternative participatory system of development, which favors grassroots initiatives over top-down directives. The Zapatistas promote development principles that connect the complex socio-historical fabric of Chiapas' indigenous communities with the local economic sphere. Their ideals revolve around the preservation of cultural and linguistic traditions, the sanctity of land for indigenous people, and the perpetuation of organic and local farming practices within the region.

The Chiapas Model in Practice

Although critics of the Zapatista movement point out that the antigovernment rhetoric of the mid-1990s has not been galvanized into a viable model of economic autonomy for poor peasants, some cases of Zapatistas-led development—such as Guaquitepec—point to their success in reconciling local context and economic needs.

The residents of Guaquitepec continue to uphold Zapatista notions of the relationship between indigenous tradition and self-sufficiency. Alternative visions of modern farming practices, combined with the establishment of strong networks of local producers and consumers, have led to the emergence of a unique commercial dynamic that has improved livelihoods for many farmers.

The Guaquitepec model extends beyond community economics and into the political sphere as well.

Through its local participatory process, the village offers a unique example of a community taking ownership of its institutions in a democratic manner. At a practical level, programs and projects are initiated through grassroots leadership and are implemented directly by the people. Locals are empowered to make changes from within.

While Guaquitepec represents a development success, taking local context and dynamics into consideration, most of Chiapas has engaged on a different path. Rather than embracing community-based development, many villages favor government-led interventions, which tend to be top-down and attempt to force change from the outside. Recently, the Mexican government has pushed to transform local farming practices into a commercially oriented industry, exemplifying the inherent tension between cultural practices and government attempts to monetize them.^[iii] Generally, these types of interventions in Chiapas have only led to a perpetuation of poverty and under-development. As the seventh most populous state with approximately 4.3 percent of the Mexican population, Chiapas contributes only 1.8 percent to the national gross domestic product, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. Extreme social inequalities are prevalent within the region, and many indigenous communities lack basic provisions such as electricity, running water, and education.

Development and its Deficiencies

An interesting issue that arises from the contrast between the aforementioned paths to development is the question of what constitutes progress in a rural society. Among communities in Chiapas, such ideas as modernization, technology, and change are not unanimously perceived as “good.” Many believe progress is derived from autonomous agricultural practices and the creation of a secure system of self-reliance. The people of Chiapas cherish indigenous political systems that are based on consensus and representative democracy, giving local voices a say in an inclusive, participatory process.

While government development programs have come pouring into Chiapas since 1994, little has been achieved toward a political reconciliation with the Zapatistas. In 1996, the San Andrés Accords granted greater autonomy and rights to indigenous peoples, but the government never implemented the agreement. The accords called for conservation of natural resources within territories used and occupied by indigenous peoples, as well as the participation of indigenous communities in determining their own development plans.^[iv] Zapatista leadership demanded autonomy from the Mexican government so that natural resources extracted from Chiapas would benefit the people of the state directly. But the government has failed to deliver.

Zapatista demands for land reforms also remain unresolved. While the movement eventually led to a dramatic redistribution of land from large landholders to small peasants between 1994 and 1998, the reforms did not bring the desired economic impact: the redistributed lands were of low yield and were subdivided into plots that were inadequate to provide enough means for survival. Simultaneously, the Mexican state offered little in the way of subsidies to small farmers and failed to offer an alternative development path that would move Chiapas up the value chain.^[v] Additionally, due to the harassment of paramilitary groups and intolerance encouraged in some communities by the government, Zapatista families were often forced from their lands to relocate to smaller areas. The eviction of populations for appropriation of resources blatantly undermines the promises of the San Andrés Accords.^[vi]

After 1994, indigenous peasants began to play a more active role in local and state politics, and various municipalities elected their first indigenous mayors; but despite enhanced political representation, Chiapas remains behind. While indigenous peasants have entered the politic sphere, dysfunctional institutions and corruption persist. Chiapas is the second most indigenously populated state in Mexico—approximately 30 percent—and yet it is poorly represented in the public sphere.^[vii] The result has been a failure to ameliorate basic inequalities against indigenous peoples, with continued marginalization and limited access to public services.

Looking Ahead

With the recent election of President Nieto, some expect the government's approach toward Chiapas to take a new direction. But the overall consensus among citizens in villages like Guaquitepec is one of distrust. Will the old PRI and its imposing practices return to power, or will it be a different kind of government? It is too early to say.

What is needed in Chiapas is a radically new political dialogue. The new presidency in Mexico offers an opportunity for the diverse stakeholders in Chiapas—politicians, bureaucrats, community organizations, Mayan and civil society leaders, teachers, experts, and more—to come together and seek long-term and sustainable solutions. Regarding rural development, a new platform is needed for rethinking poverty. It must be recognized that in certain contexts, local methods of development are more appropriate. Generating food security through community empowerment is more viable in Chiapas than through imported blueprints for development models that disregard context. Beyond dialogue, clear and specific guidelines should be established for policy implementation—without accountability mechanisms, talks would be ineffective.

What has emerged in the heart of Zapatista communities are alternative and autonomous forms of political and economic engagement, reflecting local cultural practices and traditions rather than top-down development concerns. This is reflected in the Zapatista slogan—*Para todos todo, para nosotros nada* (For everyone, everything; for us, nothing)—and oft-repeated mantra: “Autonomy is to do things ourselves, with our own ideas, and from our own traditions as indigenous people.”^[viii] Such alternative models offer engaging platforms for local empowerment and collective action.

But as has been shown, the dynamics currently operating in Chiapas are extremely dysfunctional. Neither Zapatista nor government-led development models have managed to improve the livelihoods of local indigenous communities. Although sporadic successes do arise, Chiapas generally has seen only meager improvements and persistently high levels of poverty. The conflict between indigenous communities and the national government is unsustainable and will only lead to further underdevelopment. Bringing these two worlds together in Chiapas is of utmost urgency; the alternative is a reproduction of poverty for generations to come.

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^[i] This study synthesizes information gathered from both desk and field studies. Data was collected on perceptions of local programs and the current concerns of communities as well as the wider community in Chiapas, Mexico.

^[ii] Stahler-Sholk, Richard. 2010. The Zapatista social movement: Innovation and sustainability. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 35(3): 269-290.

^[iii] Sheehy Skeffington, M., H. Morales, and B.G. Ferguson. 2008. Lessons from two contrasting organic growing systems—Chiapas, Mexico and Cuba. In *Development's futures*. Edited by Carol Healy.

Galway: Development Education & Research Network, National University of Ireland.

[iv] Hernández Navarro, Luis. 1999. The San Andrés Accords: Indians and the soul. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 23(1).

[v] [Servicio](#) Internacional para la Paz. 2012. Chiapas en datos: Tierra. Blog post, 10 March.

[vi] Mora, Mariana. 2008. The Zapatista agrarian reform. *Decolonizing politics: Zapatista indigenous autonomy in an era of neoliberal governance and low intensity warfare*. Austin: University of Texas.

[vii] [Servicio](#) Internacional para la Paz. 2012. Chiapas en datos: Pueblos indígenas. Blog post, 27 March.

[viii] Mora, 2008.