Communities in Resistance

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Over 1,000 villages and small towns in Chiapas, Mexico have declared themselves communities in resistance.Organised together into 38 Autonomous Municipalities in eastern Chiapas, the Zapatista indigenous people are building a new world. Visiting these communities is an inspiring experience. Local people have taken control of the land, schools and health care, and run things through a system of grass-roots democracy. In many communities state officials and private businesses are unable to set foot.

The Beginnings

The communities in resistance are the fruit of many years of grass-roots organising. This struggle burst into the global headlines on New Years Day 1994 when thousands of armed indigenous people took over the city of San Cristobal de las Casas and the towns of Ocosingo, Altamirano, Las Margaritas and Chanal in Chiapas.

The Zapatistas soon withdrew from the towns but in the indigenous countryside the communities in resistance were busy being born. Many estate owners fled and others were forced to give up most of their land, keeping only that which they could work themselves. Local people took over the abandoned land—800 estates, totalling 80,000 hectares,according to a Landowners Association. Some communities in resistance were formed by ejidos, an officially recognised communal land owning system, deciding to go a big step further and openly declare their total rejection of the government and its system.

Land and Liberty

The communal control of the land is at the heart of the economy in the Zapatista communities. They are totally opposed to the government attempts to introduce privatisation of land through new laws and government agricultural aid and projects. The economy is essentially subsistence agriculture,maize and beans being staples, with coffee also grown for sale. Cattle are raised in some areas.

"Our main production project is coffee. We pick the coffee beans together and put them in great big baskets...Then we clean the beans well and put them out to dry in the sun...We do all this together, and when we sell the coffee the money is for all of us..." : A women's collective in Morelia.

Some land In the Zapatista villages is worked communally, and some is worked by families. A new development is the promotion of communal vegetable plots, worked by both men and women, and growing a variety of vegetables for local consumption, thus aiming to improve nutrition and health. There are plans to widen the food available by interchanging products between different Zapatista areas.

The Zapatistas are determined to resist the introduction of genetically modified crops,which threaten the maize seeds indigenous people have developed over centuries. The Mother Seeds in Resistance project based at the Oventik autonomous secondary school is collecting, storing and safeguarding such seeds.

All the shops I saw were co-operatives. I visited a co-op shoe and boot making workshop, a "women in resistance"craft shop and wee co-op village shops where the community members take turns to staff the shop.

While people have to work really hard you get the feeling from seeing people sing and laugh while they work that it's a big change from the days of the harsh finca bosses.

Complete Control

"Our goal is to govern ourselves—to be independent and autonomous of the state and federal government. We make our decisions communally and we carry them out. All decisions here are made at the General Assembly. Every man and woman over the age of 16 votes in the Assembly, and all of us make decisions together." Zapatista villagers from Morelia describing how in the communities in resistance decision making power lies with the people.

The local village meetings also choose "responsables" to carry out particular duties, and to represent that community's view in the Autonomous Municipality. Autonomous Municipalities bring together 30 - 40 villages in the same area.Each Autonomous Municipality has a Council chosen to carry out the day to day administration. This council takes its instructions from the Assembly of the Autonomous Municipality, with representatives from each community.

Important decisions affecting a whole Autonomous Municipality are taken by a "consulta". First an assembly in each community discusses the issue, and then sends its rep, mandated to express the view of that community, to the assembly of the Autonomous Municipality. This assembly discusses the issue, but cannot reach a decision there and then. What it does is try to come to a provisional proposal. This proposal is then put to another assembly in each community, for the communities to vote yeah or nay. The final decision is arrived at by a majority vote of all the communities.

This system based on control by the grass-roots is expressed by the Zapatista slogan mandar obedeciendo—to govern by obeying.Commandante Tacho explains the nature of The Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee (CCRI):

"All us commandantes were democratically chosen in the community assemblies or by the local 'responsables' who choose the regional 'responsables'. The assemblies choose the delegates of the CCRI because the comrades at the grass-roots have to know who they are choosing, and if these people conduct themselves badly the grass-roots will remove them. Because here we are not talking about the work of an organisation but the work of a people."

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Healthy Autonomy

Before 1994 health in the indigenous communities was very poor, with widespread ill health and preventable diseases. After the insurrection,people in the communities came together to start a network of health centres and health promoters. This process is based on what the communities themselves feel they need. Health promoters from different villages come together to discuss their local health needs. What illnesses are affecting people? What kind of health courses are needed? Later, follow up meetings check how work is progressing.

The communities believe that preventing illness is much better than having to take drugs when you're already ill. Thus health education has led to basic but vital changes,e.g. boiling drinking water, improving food preparation hygiene,the construction of well situated latrines and safe disposal of rubbish.

I visited two autonomous hospitals, both built by Zapatistas from far and near donating their labour. Vital facilities like the kitchen are staffed on a rota basis by unpaid volunteers from different Zapatista villages, some walking long distances to carry out their work. These hospitals run courses for health promoters. The health promoters then return to their villages and work to develop good health there, often running a small health house with basic medical supplies. Health promoter courses include herbal medicine, pharmacy and dentistry. Despite no government funding and the frequent lack of a reliable electricity and water supply, the autonomous hospitals are striving to expand their services. An autonomous hospital I visited provided a dental service,consultations with a qualified doctor, a pharmacy, a laboratory which undertakes analysis of specimens, and a wide range of herbal medicines and preparations.

Herbal medicine is being strongly developed. I attended a graduation ceremony for 13 health promoters who had just completed a course in herbal medicine. At the ceremony each student gave a short speech, telling how they would return to their villages to practise and share their knowledge with their neighbours. This hospital featured a recently built "herboleria"where medicinal plants grown in the hospital's herb garden were processed. In many respects the promotion of herbal medicine is a rebirth of traditional indige-

nous knowledge.

In contrast to the rigid hierarchy of conventional hospitals, the autonomous hospitals have an ethos of sharing and discussion. For example qualified personnel like Doctors share in tasks like cleaning. Those involved recognise that a huge amount remains to be done. Poverty and a lack of basic services like good drinking water undermine good health. The autonomous hospitals still largely lack facilities to deal with operations and severe illnesses and injuries. But after only 8 years the foundations of community-based health care have been created.

Autonomous Education

Many Zapatista communities have expelled the government teachers and formed their own autonomous schools. The communities choose local people, often teenagers, to be "education promoters", to learn to teach in the autonomous schools. Where possible promoters take a six month course in one of the two autonomous education centres.

Most autonomous schools are primaries but there are also autonomous secondary schools,e.g. at Oventik where a young education promoter enthusiastically showed me the computer room, library, and new classrooms under construction. The idea is for promoters to develop a different vision of education of their own making, also reflected in the development of new teaching materials. The children are encouraged to learn and are not punished. Girls and women participate fully. Education is non-competitive.

In addition to history, language, maths and the environment,etc. the children learn how to organise themselves,how they can resist an exploitative system, about the rights of children, about the rights of women. Indigenous culture and language is fostered.Children learn about natural medicine, herbs and plants, and about the need to preserve and protect nature.

In a Zapatista village I visited, the sounds of singing and music were often heard from the school. One day I saw the children and the teenage education promoter roving the village on a treasure hunt, an exercise which led to the children drawing beautifully coloured maps of the village.Plays were performed before the whole community at fiestas. I had not anticipated that my journey to rebel Chiapas would include playing one of the 3 Wise Men in the school Nativity play! When you see girl pupils excitedly hug their dedicated woman teacher, you understand that this is far from the authoritarian education system we are familiar with. Each school has autonomy, the decisions to do with the running of the school being made locally.

Autonomous education is for the adults too. In New Guadalupe Tepeyac in the Lacandona jungle 60 women attended literacy classes 3 times per week, and women participated in a textile workshop for an hour each day, providing a communal break from domestic work.

Different adults sometimes also contribute to the learning process, coming into school to speak about a particular topic. "The classroom is a space where the community can share its ideas, everyone sharing their ideas and in this way being equal." The Zapatista communities have decided that it is not acceptable for adults to hit children, and this is banned.

In the small community I spent time in, the children and youths worked as well as going to school,carrying firewood and rubbish,picking fruit,etc. I gained the impression they were much more integrated into the community than in the UK.

Women Organise

"We work collectively. When the organising started everybody, men and women,started to organise. Women left their homes to go to meetings. They didn't do their work at home any more. There was no time for that. In the past we never worked collectively like we do now. Men used to tell women that they had no rights. Now we know that we all have rights. Young people work together—men and women together. Our lives are better now. We are happier now because we all have the right to getout of the house, to work in the projects and to participate in the life of our town." Women and men from the Zapatista community of Morelia.

Women from Morelia speak :" We have a Women's General Commission. We meet once a month,here or in other towns. These meetings are only for women. When all the representatives from all the communities come, there are about 150 of us. We had a meeting to draft the rules of the Women's commission. We also had a meeting to discuss the Revolutionary Women's Laws...These laws are very important. They are teaching us about our rights as women. We think that our lives as women are better now. We are happier now because we have the right to do what we want and need to do..."

Before the insurrection women didn't have any say. They were often forced to marry someone they hadn't chosen, when still very young,e.g. 13 or 14.

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They didn't go to community meetings. Girls often didn't go to school,having to stay home and help with the housework. Women didn't play sports or even dance. Now in the Zapatista communities, women participate in the meetings, girls go to school,girls and women dance and play sports. Women hold positions of responsibility in the communities and Autonomous Municipalities. Women are "health promoters" and "education promoters". Women's collectives run shops, organic gardens,bakeries, coffee production, animal raising and many other projects.

The Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Laws assert that women have the right to freely choose their partner, the right to freedom from violence by strangers or relatives, the right to occupy positions of leadership in civil and military organisations, and other basic rights. The banning of alcohol in the Zapatista communities was, I was told,largely a women's initiative—women had suffered badly from alcohol-fuelled domestic abuse. It is widely recognised that much still has to be done for women to achieve real equality—but at last things are moving in the right direction.

Basic Services

The poverty and lack of basic services suffered by indigenous communities in Chiapas is difficult to imagine for people in the "First World".Many communities don't have electricity, or have an erratic and unreliable supply. It is exceptional for homes—which are generally wooden huts with a dirt floor—to have piped water. Often water is gathered from stand pipes in the village, sometimes it has to be carried some distance from a spring.Generally the water has to be boiled before being drunk. Communities do not have sanitation. Cooking is usually done over open wood fires, leading to women especially suffering illnesses from the smoke.

The Zapatista communities are striving to improve the quality of life by installing basic services, often with national and international solidarity. Projects include supplying drinking water, generating electricity, sometimes by solar power, building enclosed wood stoves, constructing compost toilets, etc.

I worked for a short time on a water project called Kiptik. Together with the local people we were installing a much-needed rain-catchment drinking water system in a small Zapatista community which up till then had no proper water supply at all. Kiptik works along with the Autonomous Municipalities, who decide in which community the project's resources are most needed. Skills and resources are shared to promote self-sufficiency. Community based water committees provide a means whereby the drinking water systems can be maintained. The Zapatistas refuse to work with NGO's who try to impose their own priorities.

The Zapatista communities in resistance are among the many communities in Chiapas who are refusing to pay the exorbitant electricity tariffs. Many Zapatista villages sport an electricity supply which has been diverted from a passing electricity line destined for a garrison or government-supporting town.

Communal Culture

The Zapatista communities have a thriving communal culture. I attended fiestas where hundreds of men, women and children arrived from dozens of different Zapatista villages in that region,with the women often in beautifully embroidered traditional dress.