# Food Sovereignty in Mexico & The Organizing Power of Women

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IN JANUARY, 2009 I participated in a three-day women's conference on Women, Food and Food Sovereignty at a nonprofit regional development center in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico called CEDESA (Centro de Desarrollo Agropecuario). Also attending were several other academics besides myself from the United States, the two present directors of CEDESA, and local residents of Mexico working as activists in the food sovereignty movement, including some from Oaxaca.
Although I had heard of the idea of food sovereignty a few years before in a conference on globalization at the Center for Global Justice in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, this was the first time I understood how this might be seen as a women's issue. Through this conference I came to appreciate the leadership of grassroots women in the struggle for food rights and local democratic control over food production, in opposition to corporate agribusiness and free trade economic arrangements that harm the poor.

I also learned that the local grassroots struggle against poverty has deep roots, deeper than the struggle against current neoliberal policies. Indeed, CEDESA has been around since the early '60s, helping to build a social base to promote sustainable development out of practices of the theology of liberation, land reform struggles, and the New Left movement. While CEDESA started organizing as a regional anti-poverty movement for small farmers, they have since joined the corporate anti-globalization movement and broadened their solidarity networks accordingly.

Like many people in the world anti-corporate globalization movement, the organizers and their allies have been inspired by the meetings of the World Social Forum, which started in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and continued yearly there until 2006. Then regional social forums on alternate years were instituted, which have included the first United States Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007, and will include the second USSF in Detroit in June 2010.

From these global and regional social forums a view is emerging of a radical third way to organize against capitalist globalization. Called the Solidarity Economy, this is a set of economic and political networks that include worker- and consumer-owned cooperatives, rural farmers' unions, fair trade networks, local social money and bartering networks, and the global food sovereignty movement advocating locally grown food and ecologically-sustainable development.

The new global communication networks, particularly the internet and the dedicated work of reporters for independent (Indy) media, have allowed diverse populations to connect to and learn from anti-corporate globalization movements in other countries, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico,

the Landless Farmer Movement (Movimiento Sin Tierra) in Brazil, and the Unemployed Workers' Movement in Argentina.

The world anti-corporate globalization movement has its roots in such networks, and forms a growing global resistance to the world capitalist system of commodity production for private profit that has had disastrous environmental and social effects ever since its origin and spread by European imperialism and colonization of non-European populations three or four centuries ago.

## Production Rather than Profit

Local economic exchanges and production designed primarily for use rather than profit have existed for a long time in rural areas in countries in the global South. Even in the United States where agribusiness has diminished the numbers of independent small farmers, there continue to be pockets of local small farmer in-kind exchanges of food, fertilizer and seed where no money is involved. In spite of the power of corporate agribusiness, the number of local cooperatives, both worker- and consumer-owned, are growing, as are CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farms — small locally-owned farms with consumer-members who pay an annual fee and then share a portion of the harvest. Environmental and organic foods movements are urging people to buy locally to avoid the environmental costs of transportation, and the uncertain safety and nutritional value of food distributed by multinational corporations.

Thus the stage is set for the growth of a U.S. food sovereignty movement. We can learn from our neighbors to the south in Mexico not only how important the demand for food sovereignty is for promoting grassroots democracy and basic human rights around food for our own population, but also how important promoting fair trade solidarity in what food imports we buy as consumers is for our neighbors, and particularly for rural women.

In Mexico as in other countries with a large population of rural poor, a food sovereignty movement is growing, which claims the right of peoples to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems, in contrast to having food largely subject to international capitalist market forces [1].

The global Via Campesina movement, which has many member organizations in Latin America, advocates seven basic principles: access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food; agrarian reform which gives landless, farming and indigenous people ownership and control of the land they work; the sustainable care and use of natural resources, especially land, water, and seeds and livestock breeds; the prioritization of production for domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency; challenging the globalization of hunger caused by the growing control of multinational corporations over agricultural policies of multilateral organizations such as the WTO, World Bank and the IMF; ending the ongoing displacement, forced urbanization, repression and increasing incidence of racism against smallholder farmers which causes violence and disrupts social peace; and finally that smallholder farmers, and particularly rural women, have democratic input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels [2].

It should be noted that the Via Campesina movement challenges the development ideas both of capitalist market theory and of some parts of the Marxist tradition that see collectivization or large-scale farming as inherent "progress." Both types of modernist development model assume that peasants (small farmers) will disappear with the development of capitalist multinational agri-business or state socialist state farming systems. For these Marxists, peasants by definition cannot be organized as revolutionaries.

The global food sovereignty movement advocates a path for development that demands the defense of decentralized and localized food production with democratic input into the conditions and contents of this production by small farmers, whether owners or workers.

## Food Sovereignty in Mexico

Much analysis has already been made of the Zapatista challenge to neoliberalism by the indigenous movement in Chiapas, Mexico. Less well known, however, are related indigenous ecological and food sovereignty movements based in Oaxaca, which are developing appropriate technology for small-scale ecological production, local food production cooperatives with such crops as cacao, as well as the urban garden movement, the clean water and aquifer movement and popular education efforts on these issues spurred by the Universidad de la Tierra in Oaxaca, founded by Gustavo Esteva, a left intellectual known for his support of the Zapatistas.
In the rest of this article I would like to concentrate on central Mexico and the growth there of CEDESA and its philosophy and practice.

CEDESA was legally chartered as a nonprofit organization in 1965. It was founded by a liberation theology priest, Father Guillermo Dávalos (Padre Memo) who started working with campesinos of northern Guanajuato in 1959.

Padre Memo created a boarding school in the early ’60s in the town of Dolores Hidalgo to educate young campesinos in short courses with diverse subjects such as group discussion techniques, grassroots organizing, campesino and women’s issues, and development of micro-businesses such as production of fruit, poultry and livestock, beekeeping, food preservation, and sewing.

In 1965, he purchased some land south of town for an experimental farm and campesino education center. Construction was started with loans from the local savings cooperative he founded, funds from the Social Secretariat of the Catholic Church. Twenty-five percent of the funds to complete construction came from sales of food products produced by CEDESA. The fundamental purpose of the Center was to organize and teach campesinos the skills necessary to combat rural poverty.

Padre Memo was expelled from northern Guanajuato after the Mexican government’s brutal repression of progressive movements following the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City. The CEDESA project continued after 1970 under the leadership of a team of young activists mentored by Padre Memo.
Two young women, Luz Maria (Lucha) Rivera Pérez and Tere Martínez Delgado, had been leaders of the Young Christian Farmers (JAC) movement founded in Michoacán in the 1960s. At CEDESA, they promoted literacy and organized schools and solidarity groups for agricultural and livestock production, using the philosophy of mutual aid and solidarity to create savings and loan, consumer and production cooperatives. They were later joined in 1972 in the leadership of CEDESA by Tere’s sister, Graciela (Chela) Martínez Delgado. Although Lucha has since died, Tere and Chela continue today as directors of CEDESA.

A CEDESA pamphlet (Rivera Pérez et al, 2008) describes its history in three phases: (1) the construction of the social base and emergence of a grassroots campesino movement from 1970-1979; (2) mobilization and regional organizing against the neoliberal policies of President Miguel de la Madrid and successors in the 1980s, including the struggle for land and water; and (3) from the 1990s to the present, the integration of CEDESA’s alternative economic project, including the campaign for drinking water, the defense of the land, and the promotion of the self-sustaining family economy.

In what follows, I will sketch some details of events and projects in these periods, emphasizing how the popular education and principles of mutual aid and solidarity fostered by CEDESA supported the growth of militant social movements for farmers' rights as well as highlighted the empowerment of rural women.

## Women's Organizing Role

CEDESA in 1971 was asked to participate in a regional literacy program which gained them credibility, and from 1972 to 1978 they organized production projects including beekeeping groups as a way to create local food resources, and successfully initiated a revolving loan fund out of their earnings. Based on their strategies of mutual assistance and production emphasizing consumption over sales, they helped to create a beekeepers' union (ASANG).

In 1976 CEDESA responded to a request by women in the rural community of La California to help them create a collectively run mill for grinding corn. The women were radicalized in the process, as they were given the bureaucratic runaround when they were denied a permit to get electricity installed in the mill and realized the government did not respond to the needs of the poor. Nonetheless they were successful in purchasing a gas-powered mill, which convinced them of the organizing power of women united. Many of these same women from La California and surrounding communities then became key organizers in the water and land battles in the next decade.

In 1978, Lucha Rivera and Chela Martínez found themselves in a conference on appropriate technologies with only six other women out of a group of 50, and decided that more participation by women in sustainable development leadership was necessary. So in 1979 they organized the First Latin American meeting of women at CEDESA where the La California women presented their story of the mill cooperative, and received support from the international group.

Women continued to be key in the second phase of mobilization and regional organizing around food nutrition, health and water issues. Partly because of the gender division of household labor in which women are seen as responsible for food preparation and family health care, it was primarily women who came to be trained in workshops at CEDESA dealing with curative natural medicine and preventative health measures.

These measures included improving the campesinos' diet with fresh vegetables, herbs, fruits and cereals and the use of soy products and local foods such as nopal cactus. Women trained as health promoters in these workshops then became key organizers in the drinking water campaign and in the Union of Campesino Communities of Northern Guanajuato (UCCANG), a regional organization that CEDESA helped to found.

## Land, Water Rights & Alternative Economy

In the 1980s, campesino occupations of land were initiated by farmers with petitions for land ownership pending from the 1930s and '40s. These farmers had been encouraged by Mexican President Echeverría's creation of the Secretariat for Agrarian Reform, which promised to carry out land reform. But Echeverría had the army oust and jail such farmers on disputed land and created programs for large commercial farmers to receive credits for producing crops for market. These actions only expanded agribusiness and deforestation, lowered the standard of living for campesinos and increased social unrest.

Struggles to get permits for wells and to have the government drill them for farming communities

were spearheaded by the general assemblies in rural communities, in which campesinos discussed and initiated actions for their common good. At one point during this struggle, 300 representatives from 20 communities demonstrated in front of the Governor's Palace to get a meeting with him. After several more years of struggle, the network UCCANG, formally constituted in 1986, succeeded in gaining drinking water for 50 communities by obtaining 29 wells.

Land disputes between large landowners and ejidos, that is, land owned in common by members of a community, usually resulted in legal decisions in favor of the large landowners. With the help of CEDESA, these decisions were contested by the campesinos, who used land occupations to defend their rights in spite of repression such as evictions by soldiers and jailings. Ultimately, pressure by UCCANG (supported by CEDESA) was successful in winning legal land tenancy and water rights in various rural communities, including the contested community of La Colorada, which was founded and defended by activists of La California.

In the third phase of CEDESA's organizing, the regional food sovereignty movement in the state of Guanajuato has had to deal with more of the institutionalized effects of neoliberal policies in Mexico. These include the amendment of the Mexican Constitution's Article 27 which, subsequent to the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the century and the land reform of the 1930s under Lazlo Cardenas, had guaranteed the right to communal ejido lands.
Rescinding Article 27 allowed the privatization and sale of these lands. Given the economic disadvantages that small farmers have faced, these sales meant increased agribusiness takeovers of ejido land. Privatization has been exacerbated by the passage of NAFTA, which favors importation of subsidized cheap products from the United States and puts Mexican products, particularly corn, at a disadvantage.

The resultant increased poverty in the countryside has forced the emigration of many rural men to seek low-paid farm work jobs in the United States. Thus Mexican immigrants, mostly men, are working for U.S. agribusiness, leaving women and children to fend for themselves at home in Mexico.

In the 1990s, CEDESA has redoubled its efforts to help campesinos to create self-sustaining family economies. This has included promoting backyard gardens and production using recycled water, and organic fertilizer and pest control. They have also revived ongoing beekeeping projects by aiding farmers to buy land for the apiaries and giving technical training.

UCCANG and CEDESA created a Conservation Commission for recycling and soil and water conservation, and have introduced new eco-technologies in the communities, including rainwater-harvesting cistern systems, dry toilets and efficient wood stoves and ovens. They are investigating the problem of contamination of the aquifer with fluoride and arsenic, due to agribusiness practices, as well as distillation systems to purify the water.

CEDESA has also helped to found the Mexican Network of Community Commerce (REMECC), which has initiated a system of alternative community markets. The practice of barter used in these markets have in many cases yielded more in consumption goods to women-headed households than the remittance dollars sent home by their migrant husbands [3].

## Conclusion

The history of CEDESA gives us a case study of an organization involved in a successful campaign of more than 40 years to create a sustainable alternative economy, one that stresses democratic participation in decisions involving local development and an ecologically conscientious use of

natural resources, including land and water. It is one among many local organizing projects which sustain current anti-corporate globalization struggles and the growing networks of the global solidarity economy.

CEDESA is a model example of an alternative project that explicitly values mutual assistance, collective work and the common good over corporate profits. It also has highlighted the importance of incorporating women as activists around issues of food and water rights as they impact on family health and sustainability.
Their work helping women to develop as activists shows that empowering women can empower the whole community, not in the liberal individualist sense promoted by the World Bank of teaching women to be better entrepreneurs (cf. Ferguson 2009), but by engaging them as leaders in their communities' struggles for the rights to food, health and livelihoods that they democratically control.

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## P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 146, May-June 2010.

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## Footnotes

[1] cf. www.viacampesina.org

[2] cf. Via Campesina, www.Wikipedia.org

[3] Rivera Pérez et al 2008, 16.