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Popular Participation and Access to Food: Mexico's Community Food Councils

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### Popular Participation and Access to Food: Mexico's Community Food Councils<sup>1</sup>

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Mexico's post-1982 economic crisis has made an already serious hunger problem worse. The combination of increased unemployment, reduced wages, and the withdrawal of consumer subsidies pushed increasing numbers of families to the brink of disaster. Even before the crisis, however, government studies found that nearly 42 percent of the rural population (approximately 9.5 million people) consumed between 25 percent and 40 percent below the Mexican standard of 2,750 calories per person per day (Montanari 1987, 52).<sup>2</sup>

Government spending increased dramatically during Mexico's 1978-1982 oil-debt boom, and food programs were no exception. Generalized consumer subsidies continued even after the boom collapsed in 1982, partially buffering the first four years of economic crisis; the subsidies were cut in 1986.<sup>3</sup> This study analyzes one of the few major food programs that survived the early 1980s—a massive network of village stores serving Mexico's most remote and poverty-stricken areas. Huge traditional consumer food programs had exclusively benefited city-dwellers, but the Community Food Council program was targeted specifically at the rural poor. This case of community participation in policy implementation shows how the internalization of social conflict within government agencies can directly shape access to food. The discussion begins with an overview of the challenges Mexico's economic crisis poses for food policy and is followed by an analysis of the case.

### Food Policy and the Crisis

Three different resources condition household access to food: land, income, and subsidized food-distribution channels.<sup>4</sup> Most hunger is caused by lack of access to one or more of these three resources. Hunger can therefore be fully understood only if all three factors are taken into account.

In Mexico, approximately two-thirds of the malnourished population lives in the countryside. Access to arable land and the means to work it could permit the rural poor to become self-sufficient producers, and stable employment could enable them to purchase an adequate diet in the market. Broadened access to land through an extension of Mexico's long-standing agrarian reform could be a partial solution to the problem of rural hunger, but this path has been blocked by entrenched agribusiness and ranching interests and their powerful allies inside the government.<sup>5</sup> The prospects for increased access to stable jobs are not much better. The reformist Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) emphasized broadening the internal market, but since then the Mexican government's capital-intensive, urban-biased approach to industrialization has created its own set of interests, blocking policy shifts toward significantly increased rural employment.

Although the distribution of land and employment is increasingly well understood, the determinants of access to "nonmarket" food distribution channels, such as government subsidies, have received far less attention.<sup>6</sup> All over the world, consumer food subsidies are extremely politicized. For centuries, abrupt food price increases have been associated with social upheaval. Objective "need" is rarely sufficient to account for food subsidies; "perception of threat" is usually involved. Food-subsidy policies are therefore usually the result of the convergence of interest-group politics and policymakers' understanding of how to maintain political stability.

Generalized food subsidies are usually available to all urban consumers, regardless of need.<sup>7</sup> Governments often rely on generalized subsidies to buffer political conflict and to hold together broad ruling coalitions. If the government keeps urban food prices relatively low, manufacturers are able to keep industrial wages down. These "positive-sum," populist policies for dealing with social problems are increasingly unviable, both politically and economically. Because most Latin American social programs consistently failed to benefit the poorest of the poor even when resources were available, it is difficult to contend that "more of the same" (that is, more conventional government intervention) is the answer to the hunger problem, particularly in the absence of a solution to the international debt crisis. How, then, can governments attack poverty and

hunger with programs that can be sustained in the face of long-term economic austerity?

The key to approaching the problem of hunger in the context of powerful political and economic constraints is to develop food policies that channel scarce social resources efficiently and equitably to those in greatest need. "Efficiency" implies service delivery with a minimum of wasteful bureaucracy, and "equity" implies reliable access to food for the lowest-income and most vulnerable populations, without political conditions.

The study of access to government food subsidies is crucial for understanding the prospects for creating a minimal social "safety net" for the lowest-income population in the context of ongoing economic crisis. Unless politically and economically viable "targeted" consumer food subsidies are developed and extended to both city and countryside, the burden of the debt crisis of the 1980s will continue to fall most heavily on Latin America's children, who are today being handicapped by malnutrition.<sup>8</sup>

Enforcing social selectivity in subsidy delivery is easier said than done; the history of social policy in Latin America is replete with examples of programs that failed to benefit the ostensible target groups. It is rarely in the immediate interest of government bureaucrats to deliver scarce resources to low-income, low-status social groups. It is more often in their interest to consume those resources themselves, either directly or by making them available to more powerful social groups in exchange for political or economic rewards.<sup>9</sup> The challenge to any targeted subsidy program is to confront that existing incentive structure and to replace it with one that will encourage equitable and efficient service delivery. One of the most promising alternatives is to entrust the allocation of scarce resources to the organized beneficiaries themselves. Democratic local organizations combine a direct material interest in service delivery with the potential to hold government agencies accountable to low-income communities.

The consolidation of representative local organizations is increasingly recognized to be one of the key factors that turns limited physical and economic resources into successful rural development efforts. Esman and Uphoff's study of over 150 local development associations, cooperatives, and other grassroots organizations in the developing world found that their ability to provide rural citizens with a means of participating in policy decisions was "essential for accomplishing broad-based rural development" (1984, 15). They stress the importance of local organizations as development "intermediaries" that permit the state to reach the grassroots constructively.<sup>10</sup> Mexico's village food-store network opened up one of the most important opportunities for the creation of repre-

sentative local organizations since Mexico's structural reforms of the 1930s.

### Mexico's Rural Food Distribution Program

The Mexican government created a national community-managed rural food distribution program in 1979, just as increased oil and debt income converged to create the illusion of affluence. Mexico's then-hopeful economic situation combined with a shift in the balance of political forces within the state to create an increased commitment to allocate resources to deal with the hunger problem. Reformists still lacked the political clout to confront the interests opposed to either increasing access to land or to reorienting the development model toward a more labor-intensive approach. Private grain traders, many of whom were local oligopolists, presented a more politically vulnerable target. Both government-sponsored and independent research on rural Mexico, moreover, had long emphasized the many ways in which local monopolists kept the rural poor locked in a vicious circle of poverty. Reformist food policymakers therefore chose to intervene actively in rural consumer food markets as a means to broaden access to basic foods.

They created a national network of thousands of community stores that supplied subsidized food to Mexico's lowest-income population, reaching over 13,000 communities by 1986.<sup>11</sup> The government provided the subsidized food and the communities organized the village stores. Most of the program was operated by the National Basic Foods Company (Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares, CONASUPO). CONASUPO, Mexico's second-largest non-financial state enterprise (after the government oil company), buys, processes, and distributes basic foods on a massive scale.

CONASUPO's primary purpose is to appear to further social justice and thereby to legitimate the regime. This goal requires it to respond to peasant demands to some degree. At times this institutional mission creates an environment hospitable to the view that access to food is a right and that the state should encourage peasant allies to fight for that right, within the established political system. This institutional bias was never sufficiently strong, however, to determine whether a reformist approach would actually dominate policy in practice. At issue was which interest groups would benefit more from the government's regulation of grain markets: producers, consumers, or private traders and industrialists. Reformists were only able to intervene on behalf of peasants when the reformists actually controlled policy *implementation*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the balance of power within CONASUPO shifted back and forth between "pro" and "anti-peasant" policy currents, depending on

changes in the national political environment.<sup>12</sup> The decision to launch the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program was the beginning of just such a shift.

### The Origins of CONASUPO-COPLAMAR

The National Plan for Depressed Zones and Marginal Groups (Coordinación General del Plan Nacional de Zonas Deprimidas y Grupos Marginados, COPLAMAR) was founded at the beginning of President López Portillo's term (1976–1982). In his inaugural speech, he continued Mexico's long tradition of official populist rhetoric by asking the "pardon" of the "dispossessed and marginalized," even as he presided over a sharp turn toward economic austerity and conservatism. The president had inherited Mexico's most serious economic crisis in decades, and an agreement with the International Monetary Fund sharply limited his freedom of action in the economic arena. But in 1978 López Portillo began to pursue his political agenda, which included a partial liberalization of the electoral system.<sup>13</sup> By 1979, oil income began to come on-stream and Mexico's economy was booming. López Portillo gradually shifted his primary emphasis from renewing the conditions for capital accumulation to revitalizing the regime's neglected social base.

Stock presidential speeches linked the issues of energy and food, stressing their importance to both national autonomy and economic development. Oil received huge investments, consuming much of the foreign exchange it generated, but food and agriculture were neglected during the 1977–1979 period. The apparent resolution of the energy problem created pressures to turn attention to food policy, and in particular, to "do something" about rural poverty and the loss of national food self-sufficiency. In spite of lack of enthusiasm from the major ministries, by late 1979 COPLAMAR officials were able to lobby successfully for increased resource allocation for basic social services, such as rural primary care health clinics and village food outlets in Mexico's lowest-income areas.<sup>14</sup> COPLAMAR made the most progress in those policy areas where it found the most responsive institutional allies, CONASUPO and IMSS (The Mexican Social Security Institute). CONASUPO-COPLAMAR was given a further boost in 1980, when the president announced that Mexico was going to strive to regain national food self-sufficiency. The new Mexican Food System (SAM) strategy was to revitalize peasant rainfed grain production, which had previously been neglected in favor of large-scale, often irrigated production of luxury and export products.<sup>15</sup>

The COPLAMAR and SAM programs were "reforms from above," primarily the result of high-level initiatives from the liberal wing of the political elite.<sup>16</sup> One former high-level COPLAMAR official stressed that

the program decision was "completely top-down," with no direct pressure from either official or independent peasant organizations. Those peasant organizations that were pressuring the government were more interested in land rights than in subsidies. Peasant unrest reported during the López Portillo administration was at its lowest level in the two years preceding the COPLAMAR decision (Aguado López et al. 1983, 65).<sup>17</sup> In other words, a high-level government policy current with a long-range view of the need to forestall a *potential* increase in social unrest gained increased influence over policymaking in the context of the oil-debt boom.<sup>18</sup>

#### CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's Goals: Policy Innovation and Popular Participation

The stated policy goal was to deliver basic foods at the official price to what CONASUPO-COPLAMAR defined as the "preferred target population." COPLAMAR's national surveys of living standards served as the basis for determining objective need. At least 10,000 rural communities, covering approximately 20 million people, were found to need access to the program's "basic market basket" of subsidized foods. The program's "peasant stores" were considered to have an impact on the population in a radius of five kilometers surrounding the outlet. Because of operational constraints, the program generally limited itself to communities with more than 500 inhabitants and year-round road access (DICONSA 1982, 1-4).

The key shift in government rural food distribution during the López Portillo administration was not the eventual increase in numbers of outlets, but rather the change COPLAMAR induced in how DICONSA, CONASUPO distributors, organized them. Until 1979, most of DICONSA's rural stores were concessions run by private entrepreneurs or other government agricultural agencies. An official DICONSA evaluation concluded, however, that "the enterprise's experience shows one essential operational problem: the guarantee of the final destination and price of the products in the rural stores, which because of their number and isolation complicate supervision. *The operation of concessions, which face a market in which prices of basic products are 3 or 4 times the official price in the cases of maize, sugar, and beans, make it practically impossible to avoid corrupt practices* involving the deviation of the products to other stores and industries or their sale at prices above those officially established" (DICONSA 1982, 3, emphasis added). DICONSA tried to deliver subsidized food to the rural poor through the private sector and failed.

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR planners decided that they could serve low-income rural consumers efficiently and equitably only if four con-

ditions were met. First, the program needed *guaranteed supplies* of essential foods. Shortly before the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR network was established, the López Portillo administration had already launched its Alianza line of basic foods—produced by both state and private enterprises for distribution through government channels—making low-cost processed foods (for example, powdered milk, sugar, salt, crackers, flour, pasta, and cooking oil) widely available for both the urban and rural networks.

Second, the network needed its own *storage network*, strategically situated within reach of the target areas. DICONSA's huge warehouses had traditionally been located in the state capitals, whose distance from the rural stores raised distribution costs and whose management made the diversion of subsidized foods to urban consumers and merchants more likely. The oil-debt boom made it possible for the government to build first 200, later rising to 300, large regional warehouses exclusively to serve the village stores.

Third, CONASUPO-COPLAMAR planners decided that one of the lessons of previous efforts was that the network could only rely on *its own transportation network*. Regular DICONSA staff would be unwilling to sacrifice their vehicles, and in many remote areas intermediaries monopolized access to private transportation. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR was able to buy over 3,000 vehicles in the first two years of the program, greatly facilitating both promotion of community organizing and the delivery of food (DICONSA 1982, 7). The creation of an independent infrastructure (that is, warehouses and trucks) gave reformist planners much greater control over operations than they had had in the past, when they depended much more on the existing DICONSA apparatus.

Fourth, planners agreed that *genuine community participation* in policy implementation was essential to guarantee the final destination and price of the food. They concluded from their prior experience with private concessions that "the only valid option was to involve the community itself in the supervision, and even the very management of the operations" (DICONSA 1982, 4). Most governments consider community participation useful only as a means to encourage an upward flow of technical information needed to improve local investments or as a means of sharing project maintenance costs, if they consider it useful at all. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's community participation procedures, in contrast, were primarily intended to make the bureaucratic apparatus itself more *accountable* to its ostensible clients, that is, to devolve power over policy.<sup>19</sup> The existing staff was too committed to bureaucratic and private interests to implement this policy change; a whole new network of promoters would need to be hired.

### The Subsidy Delivery Process

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR was designed to increase peasant bargaining power vis-à-vis private intermediaries. The new "Peasant Stores" were to compete with, but not replace, the high-priced private outlets, selling basic foods at an average of 30 percent below the prevailing rural market price. The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR grain price was higher than the subsidized price of urban tortillas, but the government absorbed large investments in rural distribution infrastructure.

Consumer prices in remote rural areas were often much higher than urban prices for two key reasons: high transportation costs, and frequently inefficient and uncompetitive marketing systems. The effective regulatory impact on rural consumer prices varied in practice according to the region's degree of isolation from urban markets because the more remote the region, the more likely that retail grain markets would be uncompetitive. Grain traders were, however, also often moneylenders whose clients were forced—because of past debt or possible future need for informal credit—to buy from them. This vicious circle of economic dependence was often reinforced by traditional patron-client bonds. Regulation of rural grain markets was therefore not simply a question of increasing economic competition; it would require creating viable alternatives to complex political and cultural, as well as economic, networks of dependence.

The government-supplied village stores only competed with private retailers at the "low end" of the market. Higher-income consumers tended to prefer the more reliable supplies, greater variety, and brand names available from private retailers. The most important product distributed by CONASUPO-COPLAMAR was raw corn, but it tended to be #2 grade animal feed imported from the United States. Organized rural consumers protested that this yellow variety was far inferior to Mexican white corn, particularly since it often arrived in very poor condition. Those who could afford to continued to buy white corn from private outlets. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR therefore competed with private sector retailers in a segmented market, targeting its distribution efforts to the lowest-income consumers.

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's actual coverage of its target population, essentially the rural bottom third of the income distribution, was determined in part by the geographic distribution of its network. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR built its network primarily in maize-deficit areas in the central and southern parts of the country. The geographic selection process was carried out largely by policymakers who used objective criteria of need, rather than by administrators or politicians who might be more likely to use the allocation process as part of the traditional

political patronage system. The pressures from the electorally oriented wing of the political system were powerful, however, and could not be resisted entirely.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the warehouse sites were chosen in consultation with the official National Indigenous Institute (INI), COPLAMAR's close political ally. COPLAMAR also privately consulted autonomous regional peasant organizations. One official directly involved with site selection estimated that about thirty of the locations were deliberately chosen as part of an attempt to provide economic resources and political legitimacy to nascent grassroots democratic peasant organizations. Some of these local movements were operating within the official political party structure, but most were independent of parties. The idea was that the program's procedures for democratizing DICONSA operations would most likely be actively carried out where grassroots mobilization was already in process.

The location of the stores in areas of need was necessary but not sufficient to assure the delivery of basic foods at the official price to the target population. DICONSA judged the performance of its regional branch managers by conventional sales and profit criteria, creating powerful individual and institutional incentives to favor urban over village stores when allocating scarce resources. Branch managers preferred to sell mayonnaise in the state capitals rather than raw corn in the countryside. In addition, organized peasant consumers were a new and not always welcome clientele for DICONSA's officials. Many were indigenous people; Mexico City-based CONASUPO-COPLAMAR officials reported that DICONSA administrators were often quite uncomfortable with being held accountable by people they considered ethnically inferior.

Regional food officials also faced powerful economic incentives to sell subsidized grain illegally to private merchants, who in turn would resell it in remote areas for double or triple the official price. Because CONASUPO made only limited amounts of grain available to the rural distribution program, even during the oil-debt boom, diversion to private intermediaries left the village stores empty. The community participation procedures were designed precisely to create a social force that would counter this built-in temptation for abuse at the operational level.

Rural consumer food subsidies were only effectively delivered when the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program was able to change the incentive structure that shaped the behavior of operational-level policy implementors. This change was induced by providing political and economic resources to peasant communities for the creation of *social counterweights* to offset the power local elites traditionally wield over the rural development policy implementation process. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR changed the environment: peasant communities had to decide whether to assume the political and economic risks historically associated with



insisting on greater government accountability. As will be discussed below, a variety of factors intervened to determine the actual degree of community participation, but the important point here is that *the delivery of CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's food subsidy required the collective action of the community in defense of its immediate material interests.*<sup>21</sup>

To encourage grassroots collective action poses a serious dilemma for reformist policymakers. If beneficiary participation in the implementation of rural development is genuine, then policymakers cannot be certain that the participants will use their new power merely to follow a predictable and docile route through officially established channels. In the case of CONASUPO-COPLAMAR, reformist policymakers were willing to take the risks inherent in promoting genuine community participation in order to offset the power of local elites and traditional anti-peasant tendencies embedded in government agencies.

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR planners contended that appointing new representatives of the rural poor to bargain with the government was the first step toward attacking the roots of rural poverty. They created an officially legitimate channel for the expression of peasant dissatisfaction, which permitted reformist policymakers to situate the participation strategy squarely within the framework of the established political system. At the same time, however, *they attempted to change the political system by inducing the mobilization of a new social force to push for increased government accountability to the majority of low-income rural citizens.* Only through this *sandwich strategy* of coordinated pressure on the implementation agency from both above and below would reformist policymakers be able to promote social and economic change.

Policy implementation began with the selection of organizers to promote the formation of community food-supply committees. Most COPLAMAR field organizers saw the government's political party as more often part of the problem than part of the solution. The majority of organizers were *not*, however, members of opposition political parties. The recruits tended to be nonpartisan community activists who saw the consolidation of autonomous grassroots organizations, rather than partisan electoral politics, as the path to social justice and the democratization of Mexican society.

The promoter's key task was to organize community assemblies to choose the people who would represent the village in the process of overseeing and managing DICONSA operations at the village and regional level. The main purpose of the assemblies was to create a new and democratic community organization in order to increase the accountability of government food agencies.

The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR promoters were officially presented to the municipal and ejido authorities when the program began, but

given the program's objectives it is not surprising that the promoters rarely received a warm welcome.<sup>22</sup> The traditional process for electing authorities in most ejidos and rural municipalities is quite flawed, and entrenched local elites did not welcome the creation of autonomous new interest groups. One former high-level COPLAMAR official estimated that 70 percent of the municipal and ejido leaders opposed the program. In some remote communities promoters had to meet with villagers clandestinely because of the threat of violence from local political bosses (*caciques*) who insisted that all government programs be channeled through them. Although the promoters, as government employees, were relatively immune to cacique repression, the villagers were not.<sup>23</sup>

If a community wanted to install a village store, it had to decide in a formal assembly to administer it according to the guidelines laid out by the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR promoter. The stores were set up on the principle of "co-responsibility"; the community would take responsibility for managing the store, and DICONSA agreed to supply it. The community would find the locale, and DICONSA would supply the working capital with which to buy merchandise. The first step by the assembly was to elect six villagers to a Rural Food Committee (*Comité Rural de Abasto*) to oversee the management of the store. The assembly was also to elect a store manager, who would be paid a commission from sales (up to 5 percent). The assembly agreed to prepare a locale for the store and to meet monthly to hear reports from the Rural Food Committee about store operations (DICONSA 1982).

The community also agreed to send two representatives, usually the president of the Rural Food Committee and the store manager, to monthly meetings of the Community Food Council (*Consejo Comunitario de Abasto*) at the regional warehouse that supplied the store. The representatives' task was to oversee the operations of the warehouse and to make sure its several dozen village stores were supplied. These councils were officially considered "one of the fundamental elements for making the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program one of shared responsibility between the community and the institution" (*Sistema C*, September 1981, 32). The nature of the councils and the scope of their power were the focal points of the political conflict over the program.<sup>24</sup>

### The Apparatus Reacts

The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program created a new force within CONASUPO: a coordinated alliance between reformist Mexico City policy managers and committed field organizers. They in turn allied with organized peasants in their efforts to pressure the rest of the CONASUPO apparatus to carry out the policy. Thus, the program could

succeed only insofar as it was able to *internalize social conflict within the agency*. By legitimizing reformist pressures on the bureaucracy from both policymakers above and consumers below, CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's *sandwich strategy* changed the bureaucracy's incentive structure. At the same time, however, the private and bureaucratic interests that were served by the agency's traditional urban bias continued in their positions of authority, and they did not remain passive in the face of this challenge (see Fig. 9.1).

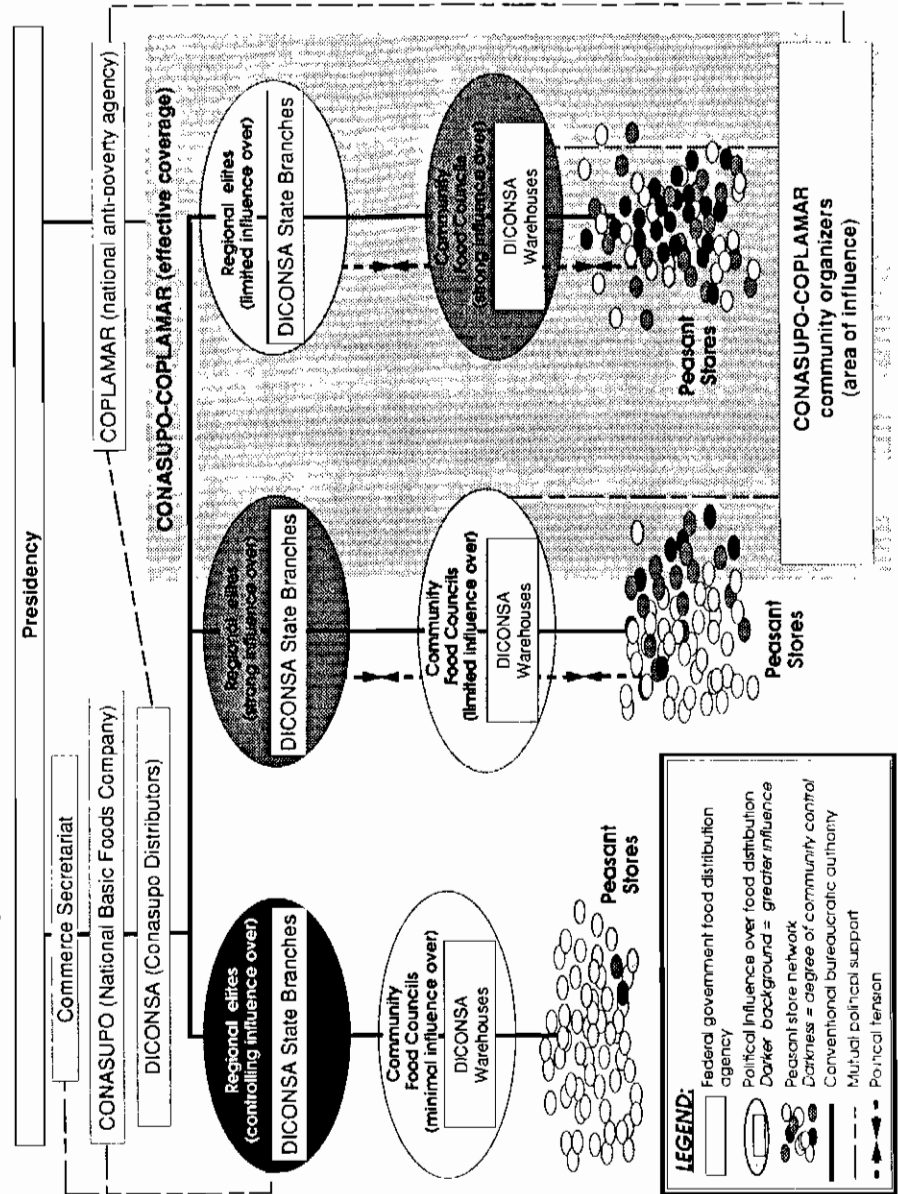
The reaction of the CONASUPO apparatus to the village store program was crucial to determining what field promoters could and could not do, as well as whether products were actually delivered to village outlets. The response of DICONSA branch managers, who were usually responsible for retail food distribution in an entire state, was central. They could block program outreach, and they allocated resources between urban and rural stores at the state level. DICONSA management usually resisted the attempt to induce powersharing with peasant community representatives, but the key issue was to what degree.<sup>25</sup> This diverse range of scenarios is depicted in Figure 9.1.

The reaction against the community organizing efforts began to mount soon after the program was launched. Commercial interests protested, as well as political authorities that simply feared democratic peasant organization of any kind. The complaints from governors, mayors, ejido commissioners and private traders charged so-called communist infiltration in the program. As one frustrated reformist policymaker put it, "anything having to do with organizing peasants to defend their interests is called communist. Anyone who carries the Constitution under their arm is called a communist" (confidential interview).

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR policymakers handled the political pressure through evasive action, rather than confronting it head-on. At first 50 members of the original field staff of 300 were fired, but by the end of the program's first two years, 400 of a total of 600 were replaced, according to a former top manager. Not all of the approximately 400 were fired; some resigned because they were demoralized by the purges. The remnants of the original staff fought an effective rear-guard action. Reformists were never fully purged, even at the policymaking level, and they defended themselves by moving away from an explicit discussion of social change to a more technical, operational approach. "Promoters" became "Operational Supervisors," as DICONSA's director dealt with the crisis by integrating COPLAMAR staff more into DICONSA's structure. As one of the managers of this shift put it, "we had to learn how to handle groceries."<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the political conflict surrounding the program, the reaction of the traditional power structure inside and outside the bureaucracy

Figure 9.1: Conasupo-Coplamar Food Distribution Operations





was too little, too late to roll back many of the regional movements encouraged by the community participation process. In those areas where promotion was not able to provide the resources for communities to organize, or where food distribution was less of a pressing problem (as in many grain surplus areas), participation failed to take off. In many grain-deficit areas, however, even though operational supervisors either toned down their activities or were replaced, the momentum of the mobilization process did not require "outside agitators" to sustain itself. In many areas of pressing need, where communities had a history of organizing in defense of their interests, the organizing process was taken up by the communities themselves.

### The Politics of the Warehouse

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR's integration of community and regional levels of participation turned simple warehouses into focal points for conflict over the allocation of key resources.<sup>27</sup> The important decisions made at the warehouse level involved how to allocate food, trucks, field staff, laborers, and working capital. The communities had the official power to nominate warehouse workers and truck drivers. They were considered community employees, in part to prevent them from unionizing and demanding higher pay from DICONSA, but also to keep their job security dependent on service to the communities. CONASUPO-COPLAMAR officials contended that communities needed leverage to make sure that drivers and loaders did their jobs effectively. Where community food councils were not participatory, these jobs reverted to traditional patronage. Where the councils were effective, however, they fought for and often won the additional right to participate in the hiring and firing of DICONSA employees, including warehouse managers and operational supervisors. These crucial personnel decisions depended on the balance of power between the councils and DICONSA branch managers, which was sometimes tipped by the intervention of Mexico City policymakers.<sup>28</sup>

How often did democratization of food distribution really happen? A wide range of former CONASUPO-COPLAMAR officials, grassroots peasant movement organizers and local leaders, agreed that by the end of the López Portillo administration, approximately 50 of the (then) 200 CONASUPO-COPLAMAR warehouses were effectively supervised by democratic community food councils. Perhaps another 50 were influenced by a process of democratic mobilization. "Effective supervision" of the warehouse does not mean that all the stores in those regions were well-stocked with quality goods. Regional-level participation was necessary but not sufficient for full provisioning, because many resource allocation

decisions were made elsewhere in the CONASUPO apparatus. Effective supervision did mean that the basic decisions made at the warehouse level were made by or in consultation with the Community Food Council.

### Where Was CONASUPO-COPLAMAR Effective?

The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program did not openly attack the local power structure, but it created the opportunity for rural citizens to do so. There were, of course, many areas where the caciques themselves, or the official peasant organizations, were able to block or control the program (as illustrated on the left-hand side of Figure 9.1). This is what one would expect from a program that emerged from policymakers' drawing boards in Mexico City, rather than in response to organized demands from below. In those areas where democratic peasant organizations already existed, however, or where the conditions were ripe for their formation, CONASUPO-COPLAMAR usually contributed to their consolidation (for example, in the states of Guerrero, Michoacán, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz, Tabasco, Yucatán, as shown on the right-hand side of Figure 9.1).<sup>29</sup> The resistance generated by this process came not only from local private- or public-sector elites but from powerful interests within CONASUPO itself.

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR worked best where the need for grain was greatest. Participation in the program was most important for rural consumers who lacked access to enough land to be at least self-sufficient. Among Mexico's many such grain-deficit, land-hungry areas, the program worked best where there already was a nascent social movement waiting for the opportunity to grow and spread.

But where do poverty-stricken, oppressed people find the resources with which to mobilize in defense of their interests? This question continues to puzzle social scientists. Many focus on whether the weave of the social fabric encourages people to come together to discuss their problems and to make decisions about how to deal with them. Indigenous culture is one of the most important resources for locally controlled development initiatives (see, for example, MacDonald 1985; Stephen 1988).<sup>30</sup>

Five centuries of conquest have deeply eroded traditional social relations in many areas, yet many indigenous communities of central and southern Mexico still retain vibrant non-Western languages, forms of self-government, and cooperative economic relations. This sense of solidarity is reproduced through continued struggle to defend traditional rights to land and natural resources. The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program was most successful at encouraging participation where peasants already had the capacity for regionwide democratic mobilization, and

those areas were primarily indigenous. The state of Oaxaca experienced some of the most remarkable cases, illustrated graphically on the right-hand side of Figure 9.1.

### The Oaxaca Community Food Council Experience

The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program was particularly well received by the indigenous communities of the impoverished southern state of Oaxaca.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority of Oaxaca's citizens are sub-subsistence rural producers (CEPAL 1982; COPLAMAR 1982). Access to subsidized basic foods, such as raw corn, beans, cooking oil, salt, and sugar, can have a significant impact on the quality of their lives.

The community food councils of Oaxaca first came together in 1982, when 20 (out of then 25) joined together in a statewide coordinating body to negotiate with DICONSA for more and better merchandise and for the freedom to organize autonomously from the government. They first met on the eve of a planned visit by President López Portillo to inaugurate one of the new warehouses. According to one of the food council leaders, "seeing the anomalies which DICONSA always uses to try to fool the campesinos, filling one warehouse full of merchandise to try to make it seem as though all 25 are the same, we all decided to close the warehouses 72 hours beforehand, so they wouldn't have a chance to fill them up at the last minute. We were going to let Lic. López Portillo in, to let him inaugurate the warehouse, but we wanted him to be able to see what the real conditions were." (*El Día*, March 24, 1984). As a result, DICONSA authorities signed a formal agreement with 7 warehouse council presidents, in representation of the 25 Oaxaca councils.

The years 1982 and 1983 were a crucial transition period for the emerging statewide network, which protested continuing supply problems and called for regular audits. The then-conservative state government cracked down, however, and the network fell apart. The leadership soon regrouped, forming the Oaxaca Food Council Coordinating Network in October 1983. By 1985 the network claimed to represent 856 communities, with over 1.4 million low-income rural consumers.<sup>32</sup>

In 1985, the Oaxaca network began to organize the first national organization of democratic community food councils in an effort to form a common bargaining position vis-à-vis DICONSA. The first meeting brought together representatives of over 100 councils, representing about one third of the 12,000 villages served by the program. The increasingly independent-minded movement met with hostility from previously sympathetic top DICONSA authorities, whose countermoves succeeded not only in blocking the consolidation of the national network, but in dividing

the Oaxaca network as well. In retrospect, it appears that the Food Council movement was not sufficiently consolidated to sustain a more confrontational approach at the national level.

Once they had been able to organize autonomously on a regional and even statewide level as consumers, Oaxacan peasants took advantage of the new "social energy" and political space to organize as producers as well.<sup>33</sup> In 1984 the Oaxaca Coordinating Network combined community-supplied capital with DICONSA-supplied trucks to supply 18,000 tons of fertilizer to peasant producers throughout the state. They managed to do this at approximately 60 percent of the price charged by the government's agricultural bank (BANRURAL). In spite of operational problems due to lack of administrative experience, the network still outperformed the government bank, which campesinos widely consider to be a parasitic institution. DICONSA authorities withdrew access to government trucks, however, abruptly undercutting the new fertilizer program.<sup>34</sup>

The Oaxaca Community Food Councils' fertilizer distribution experience led them to form their own producers' organizations. By late 1986, at least three Oaxaca food councils had "spun off" nascent autonomous regional producers' organizations. Their goal was to use increased bargaining power to retain a larger share of the value of what they produced for the market.<sup>35</sup> These efforts were particularly important because of the food councils' vulnerability to changes in government policy and loss of elite allies. This experience shows that popular participation, even if apparently narrowly channeled by government programs, can have a range of unexpected consequences, including more autonomous efforts to build democratic economic enterprises to defend poor peoples' food security.

### The Community Food Councils and Political Change

Personnel and programs change dramatically in the course of Mexico's presidential transitions, and it was by no means clear that CONASUPO-COPLAMAR would survive 1982. Its co-responsibility approach fit with the new administration's rhetorical emphasis on regional decentralization and "democratic planning." The program's targeted approach also made it quite defensible, because there were many larger and more inefficiently-spent budgets for incoming technocrats to cut. The policy current that oversaw the transition of social programs was sensitive to the potential political cost of withdrawing the state's commitment to supply food to thousands of organized communities.<sup>36</sup> As one reformist policymaker put it, "my ideological struggle was to show that it is cheaper to take up the flag of popular struggles than to confront them head on. In

other words, it is cheaper than buying arms" (confidential personal interview). The implication was that if "legitimate" channels were closed off after the participation process had been launched, peasant communities might then seek other means for redress of their grievances.

President López Portillo stepped down in widespread disfavor, and COPLAMAR went down with him, but the rural food distribution program was completely absorbed by DICONSA. It continued increasing in importance within the public grain distribution system in spite of the post-1982 economic crisis. By 1985 the number of rural stores DICONSA considered community-managed had grown to 12,272 and the rural share of DICONSA's basic food distribution had grown to 29 percent, up from 10.5 percent in 1978 (DICONSA 1986a, 9). This increased share indicated that, in relative terms, DICONSA's rural program had become an even more important part of the government's array of rural development policies.<sup>37</sup> Organized rural consumers had won a limited degree of veto power; the program had generated a constituency.

In practice, the program was carried out largely to the degree that peasant communities mobilized in support of policy goals against reluctant administrators. But peasant mobilization usually required active support from reformist policymakers in order to succeed in implementing the reform. Most importantly in the long run, *peasants took advantage of the program's participatory procedures to build their own representative organizations*, whose activities and scope were not limited to the boundaries originally defined by policymakers.

The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR experience suggests that the driving force for more accountable social policy is the *reciprocal interaction* between state reformists and social movements. This outcome depends fundamentally on two key factors. The first is the *capacity of social movements for democratic mobilization*, defined in terms of representativeness and demands for greater government accountability. Their capacity to defend themselves from the twin threats of repression and cooptation depends largely on their degree of autonomy from external interference in their decisionmaking.<sup>38</sup>

Democratic rights must be won, not granted. But some degree of freedom and capacity to organize for these rights is fundamental. The second key factor, therefore, is *the degree to which reformists, strategically located within the state, have the capacity to take democratizing initiatives*. Reformists are defined here as state officials who express their concern for long-term political stability through a willingness to bargain with relatively autonomous social movements. They must be strategically located to be effective (that is, in both the national and the local executive agencies). Otherwise it is unlikely that they will actually control the allocation of significant economic or political resources. The most im-

portant political resource they can offer is some degree of protection from both public and private sector repression, which creates space for democratic mobilization. The most important economic resource they can provide is an immediate material incentive for grassroots collective action, which usually requires operational control over policy implementation. These reformists must be strategically located at local as well as national levels in order to assure that they will actually reach grassroots movements.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusions

Mexico's community food councils encouraged widespread grassroots participation in Latin America's most important rural consumer food-subsidy program. In many of Mexico's most impoverished rural areas, the community food councils were the first democratic *regionwide* organizations of any kind. Government rural food distribution efforts succeeded only where peasants were able to mobilize, democratically and autonomously, to offset the power of entrenched regional elites. Remarkably, in spite of political opposition and cutbacks in a wide range of other social programs, the community food councils survived at least the first five years of Mexico's economic crisis. Political mobilization and conflict shaped access to food and permitted the program to survive the transition from heady "positive-sum" economic boom to prolonged "zero-sum" crisis.

Mexico's community food council experience raises the broader question: how can social justice be reconciled with the economic pressures of austerity? The populist approaches of the past are no longer politically or economically viable. Traditionally, "more state" was the solution, as large, privileged bureaucracies subsidized better-off urban sectors first, with at best some trickle down to the largely rural bottom half of the income distribution.

Policies of the past favored generalized subsidies (that is, all urban tortillas, all gasoline, education, etc.). In the context of Latin America's continuing economic crisis, such subsidies can no longer be distributed in terms of a "positive-sum game," where many social groups can benefit to some degree, regardless of need. The challenge to social policy today is to develop *socially responsible selectivity* in resource allocation. For example, if the health budget cannot grow, will resources go to capital-intensive urban hospitals, or to rural primary care? Will the education budget go to ministry bureaucrats or to primary school teachers? If energy resources are limited, will they go to low-cost gasoline for privileged private auto owners, or to mass transportation? If food budgets are limited, will they support basic or nonbasic foods (corn and beans

or feedgrains and sugar)? If the economic crisis rules out past patterns of state subsidies for both producers and consumers and the state must keep producer prices up to avoid crop shortfalls, can targeted food distribution programs buffer the impact on the lowest-income population?

How can Latin American states provide for the basic human needs of their most vulnerable populations without reinforcing wasteful bureaucracies? Mexico's Community Food Council experience shows that beneficiary controlled food-policy implementation can allocate increasingly scarce resources efficiently and equitably. The challenge is for "lean states" to channel their increasingly scarce resources toward autonomous, democratic local organizations of the lowest-income populations. Unless these groups have the freedom and capacity to enter the political bargaining process, however, more privileged interests will inherently have priority access to the same limited resources. Hunger cannot be eliminated until the hungry are able to participate effectively in the political conflict over who is to benefit from government action.

### Notes

1. This study is based on two years of field research in Mexico and draws from Fox (1986, 1990b). I would like to thank the Inter-American Foundation, the University of California, San Diego's Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, and the Institute for the Study of World Politics for their generous research support. I would also like to express my appreciation to the many policymakers, rural development activists, and grass-roots community leaders who shared their time and thoughts with me. Thanks also to Michael Fox of Rebus Technologies for graphic design assistance on Fig. 9.1.

2. With the crisis, the wage share of national income declined from a peak of 40.3 percent in 1976 to 27.7 percent in 1984 (INCO 1986, 7). Workers had to spend an estimated 78 percent of the minimum wage on food in 1984, compared to 55 percent in 1976 (INN 1986). Because underemployment is so widespread and persistent, Mexicans who work full time at the minimum wage are considered in the *upper* half of the income distribution.

3. Even during 1982-1984, when food subsidies increased, the minimum wage fell more than real food prices (except for tortillas). Reliable data on changing consumption patterns are scarce. The National Consumer Institute has done several small surveys of changing consumption patterns and survival strategies in urban areas. Less is known about rural consumption patterns, although some economists suggest that the urban poor and middle classes have suffered the most (Lustig 1990). Any systematic urban/rural comparison would have to distinguish those rural producers who have sufficient access to land and inputs to harvest enough for household needs from the rural majority who do not. The landless and sub-subsistence peasants are likely to have suffered the most significant changes in food consumption, except where government food distribution networks operate or where atypical job opportunities are

available (that is, tourism, narcotics). To my knowledge, Grindle (1988, 1989) has published the only study that specifically documents the effects of the post-1982 crisis at the level of rural communities.

4. Household access is understood to be necessary but not sufficient for equitable distribution among family members.

5. In spite of seventy years of agrarian reform, there are more landless farmworkers today than before the 1910-1917 revolution. Estimates of the farmworker population range up to 5 million. They must travel from one seasonal job to another, rarely earning the minimum wage. Most retain some access to land, but their parcels (as well as government support services) are inadequate to provide year-round subsistence. According to experts at Mexico's National Nutrition Institute, by 1987 approximately 3 million Mexicans had been forced by hunger to migrate to the cities (on both sides of the border) since the economic crisis had begun in 1982. For basic works on Mexico's agrarian reform, see, among many, CEPAL (1982), Esteva (1983), Sanderson (1981), and Warman (1980a, 1980b). For the most comprehensive recent overview of agrarian issues, see Zepeda Patterson (1988). On rural-urban migration, see Arizpe (1978), Grindle (1988) and the many works of the University of California, San Diego's Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies. On landless farmworkers, see Astorga (1985), de Grammont (1986), and Paré (1977).

6. Research is available on the economic costs and impact of consumer subsidies, but few studies are available on their fundamentally political determinants. For economic analyses of consumer food subsidies, see Austin (1981), Timmer, Pearson, and Falcon (1983), and the publications of the International Food Policy Research Institute (for example, Lustig 1986). For further analysis of the politics of food subsidies in Mexico, see Fox (1986).

7. The issue of access to food through subsidies is part of the broader question of which interests governments serve, how they serve them and why. Traditionally, most Latin American government social programs primarily served to consolidate relatively privileged urban political constituencies, through clientelism, concessions to the minority of the urban working class able to organize trade unions, and the creation of middle-class employment opportunities, that is, social-security programs. Most government subsidies, however, are usually allocated as economic policy instruments rather than through social programs (that is, low-cost energy, infrastructure, credit, and other inputs for capital-intensive industrial ventures).

8. Of the 2 million children born annually in Mexico, an estimated 100,000 die because of malnutrition-related causes, and another 1 million survive with physical or mental limitations caused by lack of food (INN 1986).

9. Tendler (1982) and Leonard (1982) analyze how the structure of development projects and their degree of vulnerability to local elite monopolization affects the degree to which their benefits are diverted away from the rural poor. As Heaver points out in his study of the politics of the implementation of rural development projects, "new programs and projects must take into account bureaucratic politics, and provide an incentive, in terms of perceived personal advantage, for the bureaucrats [involved] at each level . . . [B]ureaucrats, like

peasants, are rational. It is not often that ignorance and apathy are determinants of behavior, but that existing incentive systems make it in officials' rational self-interest to be apathetic in pursuit of development goals" (1982, iv-v).

10. Esman and Uphoff argue that four factors are crucial for effective rural local organization. They conclude that local membership organizations should: first, have more than one level of organization, to permit effective intermediation between the village and the government and/or private sector. Second, local organizations should complement rather than compete with other development institutions. Third, horizontal and vertical linkages play key roles in increasing the efficacy of local organization efforts. Horizontal linkages bring local organizations with similar interests together, and vertical linkages increase their voice within policymaking circles. Fourth, Esman and Uphoff find that multiple channels for vertical communication are crucial to effective linking of the government and village (1984, 29-30).

11. The number of rural stores increased dramatically, as the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR network expanded and the traditional private concessions were gradually phased out. The rural share of stores rose from 31 percent in 1977 to 81 percent in 1982, when they numbered just over 9,000 (*Informe de Gobierno* 1983, 178). By 1986 DICONSA supplied over 13,000 peasant stores out of a total national network of over 19,000. Except for large shopping centers and trade-union-managed stores, most of the remainder were concessions to private entrepreneurs (DICONSA, unpublished internal memo, 1987).

12. On CONASUPO's early 1970s reform efforts, see Austin (1978); Esteva (1979); and Grindle (1977). For an important overview and critique of CONASUPO's role in Mexico's agro-industrial system, see Barkin and Suárez (1985). On CONASUPO's role in delivering food subsidies, see Lustig and Martín del Campo (1985) and Lustig (1986). On the range of CONASUPO activities during the 1980-1982 Mexican Food System food self-sufficiency strategy, see Austin and Fox (1987) and Fox (1986).

13. Because most political parties were either illegal or did not consider the electoral process legitimate, he had won the presidency unopposed. This lack of even formal competition, combined with the atmosphere of political crisis surrounding the 1976 transition, put the problem of renewing the system's mass political legitimacy squarely on the presidential agenda.

14. See COPLAMAR's five volumes on nutrition, health, housing, education, and the geographic distribution of indicators of "marginality."

15. On Mexico's loss of food self-sufficiency, see, among others, Barkin (1987), Barkin and Suárez (1985); Luiselli (1980); Luiselli and Mariscal (1981); Redcliff (1981a,b). Through the late 1970s, academics and political commentators developed a powerful critique of government bias in favor of large, irrigated, export and industrial farms at the expense of support for peasant rainfed grain farms. The 1980-1982 Mexican Food System strategy gave this critique the legitimacy of official government policy analysis. For overviews of the SAM, see Austin and Esteva (1987); Fox (1986, 1990b); and Spalding (1985).

16. From different points in the food chain, SAM (primarily from the production process) and CONASUPO-COPLAMAR (from marketing) each at-

tempted to attack Mexico's longstanding problem of rural poverty with what policymakers viewed as structural reforms. One of SAM's basic incentives was to raise the government's grain purchase prices, but this measure could hurt low-income rural consumers. As the Price Commission of the policymaking Agricultural Cabinet contended in a 1980 internal proposal, "the increase in the guaranteed price will have a regressive impact on broad sectors of the rural population, since many do not produce enough maize to satisfy their consumption needs. They therefore have to obtain maize in the market, at prices which will surely rise significantly. *We therefore emphatically recommend that CONASUPO, through its CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program, participate widely in depressed areas, maintaining the current maize price there*" (emphasis in original; private, unpublished proposal).

17. As one former middle-level COPLAMAR administrator explained it, "COPLAMAR's intent was to try to control peasant discontent and independent peasant organization, to mediate it or keep it within certain limits. The program was targeted fundamentally to the poor fraction of the peasantry . . . [After the anti-reform backlash of 1976]. The state had to opt, on the one hand, for a line that respected the interests of the agrarian oligarchy through slowing the pace of land redistribution, but on the other hand it had to offer some solution to the situation in the countryside." Aguado López and his colleagues found that mobilization levels began to rise significantly in 1980 and continued to rise in 1981 and 1982. Whatever food-policy reformists' intentions may have been, this pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that the 1980-1982 reformist shift in food policy encouraged mobilization, as the possibilities of winning concessions increased.

18. The view of the reformist policymakers themselves is consistent with this approach. According to a top political adviser to the director of CONASUPO's distribution arm (DICONSA), the reasons for the "democratization in these programs is part of a history which goes back further than López Portillo, even further than [former President] Echeverría, back to the [student] movements of 1968, when many of the people who participated . . . went out to work in the countryside after the 2nd of October [the army massacre of several hundred unarmed student protestors]. There were two results. First, there was a political decision at the highest levels to take up the issue of popular participation in a democratic way, since the link between the base and the state had been dislocated, or broken. That was one of the reasons the state tried to recover its social base through a broadening of democratization in certain policies and regions. Second, the people who went out to work in the countryside began to work at the grassroots level to build independent, autonomous social movements. In the case of CONASUPO-COPLAMAR there was a convergence between the government's political expectations and needs and an organizing process which was already going on. I don't think that either the organization and democratization happened spontaneously, or that it came about as a result of the government's political posture, rather that the [reformist] position from above converged with a movement from below" (personal interview). This adviser himself acted as a communications backchannel between government reformists and grassroots movement leaders.



His view shows that the "sandwich strategy" of coordinated pressure from above and below in favor of increased democratization was consciously pursued from both inside and outside the state.

19. Mexico's principal previous effort at integrating community participation into the policy process was the PIDER program, begun in 1973 and later funded by the World Bank. In the case of PIDER, however, participation was ostensibly encouraged only in the selection of community-level public investments, not in the implementation of the projects (and then only several years after the project was launched). As Cernea's detailed study of the participation process in PIDER noted, lack of community involvement in the control and monitoring of the implementation process was one of the key weaknesses of the program (1983, 25, 61). Although in theory PIDER shared COPLAMAR's goal of encouraging participation in order to increase the accountability of government development agencies to their ostensible beneficiaries, it developed no means for consistently doing this in practice (Cernea 1983, 43, 69).

20. Many ruling party politicians lobbied heavily for their localities. The petitioners were usually rejected if the area did not fit COPLAMAR's official definition of need. The decisions were highly centralized by national-level reformists in Mexico City, rather than involving the official participation of politicians more directly responsive to traditional regional elites, such as state governors; governors did manage to intervene to a limited degree. According to one former top COPLAMAR official, of the 200 warehouse sites originally submitted for approval, a total of 9 were vetoed for political reasons, usually by governors who did not want the program's benefits allocated to a contested region.

21. Collective action beyond the immediate community is qualitatively more difficult in rural than in urban areas (Fox 1990a). Populations are more dispersed and horizontal communication is more difficult (Olson, 1985). Individual small holders may be less likely to identify a clearly defined common enemy than, for example, factory or plantation workers. Rural people have nevertheless often overcome these obstacles, particularly when they are bound together by strong cultural bonds and community traditions. The most important obstacle to rural collective action is the intensity of government and private-sector violence used against rural people who come together to identify common problems and act on them. Mexico is one of several developing countries characterized by (relatively) greater political freedom in urban than in rural areas (in 1987, for example, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, and the Philippines). On political violence against peasants in two of Mexico's poorest rural states, Oaxaca and Chiapas, see Amnesty International (1986) and Paré (1990).

22. Land-use rights are ceded to ejido agrarian reform communities by the government, but the land is usually worked in individual parcels. Ejidos are politico-economic institutions that act simultaneously as organs of government control and peasant representation (Gordillo 1979, 1988a, 1988b). Approximately half of Mexico's arable land is in the reform sector.

23. At least two community leaders who worked with CONASUPO-COPLAMAR were assassinated (one in Chiapas, another in Tabasco) according

to other community food council leaders. Others were discouraged from participating with beatings and threats (Ortiz Pinchetti 1981).

24. Quantitative national indicators of participation provide a starting point. In the month of July 1982, for example, 95 percent of the community food councils' meetings planned were held. These meetings were attended by 42 percent of the representatives expected, 53 percent of whom were store managers and 31 percent of whom were Supply Committee representatives. The village store managers attended more regularly, in part because they earned their living from commissions and therefore had a direct stake in being supplied. Almost all of the meetings were attended by COPLAMAR field staff, who often used company vehicles to bring community representatives to the meetings. Of those rural food committees represented, 88 percent reported that they were satisfied with the staff support from the promoters. Only 60 percent reported, however, that their petitions were "adequately attended to" by the warehouse staff, indicating the operational bureaucracy's resistance to dealing with organized clients (DICONSA 1982, 13-14).

The data indicate that the pattern of participation did not follow the simple pyramid projected on paper. The participation process was quite uneven, and probably nonexistent in many areas. Many, perhaps most, of the council meetings did not involve the mobilized participation of the majority of communities in those regions. These figures do indicate, however, that after only two years of operation the program had achieved a significant degree of participation in a minority of the villages targeted.

25. Branch manager resistance was very frustrating to the reformist policy-makers in Mexico City, but there was little direct action they could take. Branch managers were usually chosen higher up, by the CONASUPO director in consultation with state governors. According to a former high-level regional administrator, DICONSA branch managers used a wide range of tactics to block community food councils, including such measures as gerrymandering warehouse districts to divide allied communities and preventing agency trucks from bringing community leaders to meetings from outlying areas. The more sophisticated managers would allow the trucks to pick people up for meetings but would have them skip the "troublemakers." Managers were known in some areas to intervene in the internal affairs of village and regional committees, and some were able to block field organizers from working with autonomous peasant organizations. In some cases limited supplies were delivered only to favored and docile villages in an attempt to divide the regional food council and create a clientele for the branch manager.

26. The defensive tone of one of the few official evaluations of the program reveals the political tension by the end of 1982. "The original essence and in fact the only formal goal of the whole Program is to *guarantee the final destination and price* of the products. . . . It is never useless to insist that the entire strategy—especially the community participation—was designed to meet that goal, and *no other* (DICONSA 1982, 19, emphasis in original).

27. Rural development opportunities are often blocked by elites that operate at a regional level, brokering political and economic interaction with the rest



of the country (Bartra 1975; Gordillo 1980, 1986). Few ostensibly participatory social programs effectively generate regional participation, which is crucial for creating effective counterweights in defense of peasant interests.

28. Reformist CONASUPO-COPLAMAR policymakers were frequently torn between the institutional imperative to defend the agency's last work over personnel decisions, and their knowledge that the community food councils' enemies were often their opponents as well in the internal power struggle. This institutional imperative was driven in part by the Mexico City management's need to set limits to its conflicts with its own key operational staff. It could push them just so far. If policymakers sacrificed the careers of its middle managers in response to every peasant demonstration or building occupation, the operational staff would themselves rebel, together with their allies in state governments and elsewhere in CONASUPO. As a result, only after intense regional mobilization would the branch office itself be touched. In the event that a branch manager or assistant managers had to be removed under Community Food Council pressure, they were often simply transferred to another region.

29. For a discussion of the importance of the food councils for the redemocratization of an ejido union in southern Nayarit, see Fox and Hernández (1989).

30. For an overview of indigenous movements in Mexico, see Piñeros and Silva (1987).

31. Oaxaca's history has been marked by a traditional rejection of central government authority. Unlike many other regions of Mexico, the revolution did not really happen in Oaxaca (Waterbury 1975). Urban-based elites had traditionally extracted the state's economic surplus more through their control over the terms of trade rather than through direct control over most of the land, and the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR program directly intervened in that power relationship. Economic elites thus had both historical and economic reasons for opposing the program. For an analysis of the power of organized commerce in Oaxaca, see Contreras (1987).

32. For the Coordinating Network's own detailed history of its 1982-1985 activities, see the chronology reproduced in *El Día* (August 31, 1985).

33. The notion of "social energy" follows Hirschman (1984). This process also fits his idea of an "inverted development sequence." These Oaxacan peasants had been unable to organize as producers until they organized as consumers, contradicting economic assumptions regarding production as necessarily determinative of political outcomes.

34. On BANRURAL, see Austin and Fox (1987); Fox (1986); Gordillo (1988a, b); Rello (1987); Pessah (1987); and Aguilar and Araujo (1984).

35. The strategy of blocking traditional mechanisms of surplus extraction by changing the political as well as the economic terms of trade was primarily articulated on the national level by the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA). The UNORCA network represents an important new political "grey area" in the Mexican countryside, bringing together both nominally official and independent organizations. Many UNORCA producer groups were reinforced by allied community food councils (for example, see Fox

and Hernández 1989). On the UNORCA strategy, see Gordillo (1986, 1987). For analyses of the UNORCA movement, see Bartra (1989), Fox and Gordillo (1989), and Hernández (1989, 1990). For case studies and oral histories of UNORCA network members, see the weekly supplement to the Mexico City daily *El Día*, "Del Campo y el Campesino" (1984-1986).

36. DICONSA's director under President De la Madrid (1982-1988), Raúl Salinas de Gortari, was a rising star in the bureaucracy who had experience promoting rural reform in the rural road-building program during the early 1970s. He is also the brother of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, De La Madrid's secretary of programming and the budget and successor to the presidency in 1988. The Community Food Council program's relatively tolerant approach to bargaining was a crucial forerunner of the "social concertation" policy since promoted more broadly by Salinas and his associate, Manuel Camacho. See Salinas de Gortari (1982).

37. After the fall in the price of oil, all global food subsidies began to be rolled back, and by the end of 1986, even the highly sensitive tortilla subsidy was removed. Its elimination was politically managed with the creation of tortilla food stamps (*tortibonos*). The coupons were distributed through CONASUPO food and milk outlets located in primarily low-income neighborhoods, as well as through pro-government trade unions and the ruling political party. The system was modeled on the "social targeting" of the urban liquid milk distribution system, which reaches over 1 million families earning less than twice the minimum wage. The tortilla coupon system was a serious operational challenge for CONASUPO, and the number of coupons distributed during its first year was essentially symbolic, but the coupon system had the potential to grow into an important policy instrument. For a more recent report, see Werner (1988).

38. For further discussion of the issues of representation, participation, and grassroots organization autonomy from the state, see Fox and Hernández (1989).

39. For examples of the published views of reformist food policymakers who played key roles in the CONASUPO-COPLAMAR experience, see Peón Escalante (1988) and Sodi de la Tijera (1988).

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