Title

The National Crusade Against Hunger in the Highlands of Chiapas: Autonomy and Participation in a Neighborhood of San Cristobal de Las Casas

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THE NATIONAL CRUSADE AGAINST HUNGER IN THE HIGHLANDS OF CHIAPAS

Autonomy and Participation in a Neighborhood of San Cristobal de Las Casas

Surf Conference Panel Session 7A

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I.   Introduction

It is a Sunday morning in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico. As people from the neighborhood of Los Cipreses prepare for their general assembly, I help set up chairs while trying to make sense of the indigenous Tsotsil language being amplified by the megaphone. I am here to observe social workers that are coming to introduce the new Mexican federal program named The National Crusade Against Hunger and to form a community committee that will work with the government on the goals of this initiative. Local citizens slowly arrive and the general assembly starts, but there is no sight of the government representatives.

The object of my research is the National Crusade Against Hunger, a federal initiative launched by the president of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, to fight poverty and hunger on January 21st, 2013. My focus on this project is to compare 1) the official discourse and implementation of problem-solution approaches to hunger and 2) the people's understandings of hunger and their perceptions of the NCAH program. In the summer of 2013, I conducted news media research and analysis, did participant observation in both government circles and neighborhoods near and in San Cristobal de Las Casas, and held interviews with workers, bureaucrats, and residents of these rural and urban communities. In this article, I focus on the implications of an encounter that took place in a neighborhood called Los Cipreses in San Cristobal de Las Casas. My aim is to reflect on the notion of participation, which is a main component of the methodology and objectives of the NCAH.

II.   Context

San Cristobal de Las Casas is the economic and political center of the Highland Region of Chiapas. Dating back to 1528, the city's colonial architecture holds landmarks of several periods of ethnic segregation and discrimination that induced the activist and scholar Andres Aubry to name it "the dual city."[1] An example is the division between the center and periphery of the city, predominantly inhabited by what Mexicans call "Mestizos" and "Indians" respectively.

In 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation declared war against the Mexican government and took over San Cristobal de Las Casas and other four municipal head towns. After holding peace dialogues, leading marches to the capital, and making demands to the Mexican government, the Zapatistas became known internationally for their claims to autonomy and for their demands for government recognition of cultural difference in order to achieve "a world in which many worlds fit."[2]

The neighborhood of Los Cipreses is located on the peripheral Northern Zone of San Cristobal. Los Cipreses was first an "improvised" settlement of displaced inhabitants of San Juan Chamula, but people for the past ten years from different Highland municipalities have joined the town, thus forming a mixed community of Tseltal and Tsotsil speakers. These Maya communities experienced rising waves of migration, especially in the 1980s, when rural-urban migration skyrocketed due to religious conflict, land scarcity, and population growth in the hinterlands of San Cristobal.[3] Looking for a neighborhood where I could meet people and ask them about the NCAH, I came to Los Cipreses because I knew their monthly general assembly was taking place soon.

That Sunday morning, an hour passed after the general assembly started when the government workers finally arrived. They lost the priority they had been granted of speaking first and had to wait until all the points on the agenda were addressed and the appointment of neighborhood committee members was completed. By the time they were given the chance to speak—in Spanish—half the people had left and the rest were complaining, ironically, that they were hungry. The social workers quickly explained that the Crusade was a program that could bring electricity, paved streets, and other government support, but that the neighborhood needed a community committee to first present a development plan. However, rather than suggesting candidates for a committee, the people who were present just signed the paper and left to go home. In the end, the committee was selected by the neighborhood president and integrated by people who were already serving on other committees. After three weeks of being familiarized with the objectives of the NCAH, I came to see that the outcomes of the encounter between the social workers and the assembly that Sunday were not optimal. The methodology of community participation that the government workers were trying to introduce ran head on into local forms of participation and perceptions of the government that negotiated and resisted the terms in which the neighborhood was supposed to "participate" in the initiative. I argue that these local forms of participation enjoy some degree of autonomy that render the government's strategy secondary to their own, and that participating on the neighborhood's own terms is a way in which its residents maintain a degree of collective autonomy from government control. This

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1   Aubry, Andrés. *San Cristóbal De Las Casas: Su Historia Urbana, Demográfica Y Monumental, 1528–1990* (S.C. Las Casas, Chis., México: INAREMAC, 1991).

2   Lebot, Yvon, and Subcomandante Marcos. *El Sueño Zapatista*. (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997).

3   Betancourt, Aduen Darío. *Bases Regionales En La Formación De Comunas Rurales-urbanas En San Cristóbal De Las Casas, Chiapas*. (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: Universidad Autónoma De Chiapas, 1997).

Figure 1.   A social worker of the National Crusade Against Hunger (NCAH) stands among the committee members of the neighborhood of Los Cipreses, waiting for her turn to speak in the general assembly and explain the objectives of the federal program. Photograph taken by myself, August 4, 2013.

strategy is evident on the completion of the necessary steps to be accounted for in the program, while giving priority to the existing participatory mechanisms in the neighborhood over the ones prescribed by the NCAH.

III.   Autonomous Spaces and Practices

Los Cipreses, seen through a lens of a "de facto" autonomy,[4] has social and territorial practices that are self-organized and independent from official government structures. Around the year 1993, residents from this and other two adjacent neighborhoods pooled resources and labor together to build their own water system because the government would not build it for them.[5] To this day, the residents of the neighborhood get their water from a spring in a community up the mountain instead of the official water distributor. The president or *representante* of the neighborhood told me, "They brought water and electricity on their own; they carried the light post themselves... back in the day they wouldn't give us anything, but after [the] 94' [Zapatista rebellion] they brought light and sewage and people were happy."[6] Since 94', the local government has paid more attention to the indigenous periphery and their demands, providing electricity and paving some streets, but the community has always had their own system of neighborhood committees for completing different

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4   The term "de facto" is used by scholars in Mexico to describe the socio-political structures of indigenous communities in Mexico that already function with a certain degree of autonomy without being politically recognized as such.

5   Gomez Santiz, Alejandro. Informal interview in the office of the local authorities of Los Cipreses. August 4, 2013.

6   Ibid.

tasks, such as the water system, street, elementary school, kindergarten, and graveyard committees. In addition, there are local police or *mayoles*, who assist the judge in charge of conflict resolution, called *agente auxiliar municipal*.[7] Every family in the neighborhood has to send a member to serve on any of these positions or committees, which are rotated every one, two or three years depending on the designated position. A person who serves rests for five years before she or he gets another assignment. The people also pay a system of quotas to run their schools as well as to fund urgent public works needed at different places in the neighborhood.[8]

The Mexican intellectual Gustavo Esteva calls these spaces and new forms of organization "the new commons," which he describes as spaces that allow people to live on their own terms.[9] Gustavo Esteva describes the indigenous' proposal of autonomy as the ability of peoples "to organize the political and juridical spaces so that they can practice their own way of life and government."[10] To a certain extent, the community of Los Cipreses has developed an autonomous sphere that allows them to organize in ways reminiscent of the rural communities they come from. In Los Cipreses, this autonomy is evident in the conditioning to the government's influence in their physical living spaces. For instance, by agreement the neighborhood does not allow the police to come into their neighborhood, and their already established social organization is respected over government-recognized roles, as I observed during the visit of the NCAH social workers.

IV.   Participation and Development

Given that the NCAH is based on the notion of participatory community development, its first stage was the formation of community committees in order to educate people about the government strategy and coordinate actions with them.[11] The community could thus articulate their needs and priorities to the government, who in turn could coordinate departments and programs to channel the necessary resources and funding for their development projects. However, considering the university professor Gabriela Barajas' critique of social programs in Mexico, we can see how community-based development projects have been used to "generate popular support for the president and deal with potentially conflictive political or social zones."[12] Moreover, the Iranian politician and intellectual Majid Rahnema defines participation as a tool of government used for making development programs more efficient and cheap. He says, "The political function of participation was to… create a bridge between the establishment and its target populations."[13] Thus, this outreaching of the government towards civil society involves a plan beneficiaries are supposed to join under the appearance of democratic and free participation, but the history and conditions shaping this strategy need to be considering when examining the

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7   Ibid.

8   Ibid., and field notes by the author on August 4 during the general assembly.

9   Esteva, Gustavo, "Development" in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power,* ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed, 1992).

10   Esteva, Gustavo, "The Meaning and Scope of the Struggle for Autonomy" in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Mar., 2001), p. 133

11   Quiñonez, Octavio. Interview with the Highland Regional Coordinator of the NCAH in the government office of La Albarrada, August 8, 2013.

12   Barajas, Gabriela, "Las políticas de administración de la pobreza en México: ayer y hoy" in *Foro internacional*, v. 42, no. 1 (167) (ene.-mar. 2002).

13   Rahnema, Majid, "Participation" in The Development Dictionary: *A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed, 1992) p. 133.

impacts and implementation of a social development program such as this one.

As for the residents of Los Cipreses, they did not take the government proposals of participation at face value, but saw them as directly linked to politicians' intents to generate popular support. One of the oldest residents of the neighborhood discusses this old trend by saying,

> Their government officials come to tell us "we want to support you," but… they only come before elections, and we get together and say "ok, let's support them," and when [our] authorities go to ask for something they won't provide it.[14]

As these kinds of experiences are very common in Mexico, the NCAH is perceived by some of these residents as just another proposal to be skeptical about. It has been precisely because of this negligence and past discrimination that the people have invested their energy and attention towards participation in their own system of committees. For example, any collective issues concerning the government are the responsibility of the neighborhood representative. According to him, the committee members of the NCAH were designated with existing committee members in order "to avoid internal conflicts. The community had already agreed that government issues are handled by the [neighborhood] president."[15] Thus, although the social workers were able to form a committee for the government program, they could not ask for more serious involvement of everyone in the newly formed committee lest they violated the community's agreements.

Thus, the specific social workers' proposal of participatory development through the NCAH—by which I mean the tool for governing previously discussed—comes to be utilized as a local tool, used for the neighborhood's own goals. The tension between these external forces and the internal forms of organization echoes Kiran Asher's understanding of government policies of development and their local reception. By arguing that, "development and resistance are related dialectically," Asher's perspective captures how both sides influence and transform each other by incorporating ideas, discourses and practices of the counterpart to exercise their power and agency, and eventually, their own political strategies.[16] In this light, the residents of Los Cipreses give and take from their autonomy in order to engage with the government's development program that comes along with conditions and limitations to implementation. The last conversation I had with three committee members illustrates this negotiable relationship. Commenting on the Zapatistas and their proposals of autonomy, I asked why the neighborhood never considered joining the organization. One of them replied,

> … Everyone has their organization [and] alignments… it depends on how the government handles it. We are working with the government right now, but if they fail, we are going to go, we are going to go and join them.[17]

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14   Anonymous resident of Los Cipreses. Informal interview in the office of authorities. August 11, 2013.

15   Gomez Santiz, Alejandro. Informal interview in the office of the local authorities of Los Cipreses. August 4, 2013.

16   Asher, Kiran. *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) p. 25.

17   Gomez Santiz, Manuel and two anonymous residents of Los Cipreses. Conversation in the office of the local authorities of Los Cipreses. August 12, 2013.

V.   Conclusion

There are several problems that this story poses to a national development project such as the NCAH. In a multicultural country that for decades used public policy to assimilate, homogenize, and control indigenous populations, the question of inclusion and democracy are fundamental before even considering development solutions. Although the citizens of Los Cipreses distrust and have reservations about fully complying with government practices, they still participate in programs such as the NCAH, hoping that for once, the government will indeed deliver its promises. Perhaps, then, the middle ground held by this community represents a form of resistance that may appear politically ambiguous, but in reality is a tactic for survival accompanied by the aspiration to achieve a degree of self-determination.

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