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Collective Action, Gender Dynamics and the Constraints for Scaling Up Women Initiatives in Rural Mexico

*The Case of “El Color de la Tierra”, An Indigenous
Collective Initiative in Western Mexico*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an analysis of the tension indigenous rural women face as a result of partaking in collective actions and the rewards they gain from it. Through the reconstruction of an indigenous women-based collective action approach operating in indigenous community in western Mexico, the qualitative study intends to discuss the potentials and limits of SSE to expand and generate greater impact. The paper argues that the expansion potential of a collective action primarily depends on its own members and on the external actors. The paper concludes that as long as the rewards obtained through the organization are perceived as worthy enough to cope with the tensions it involves, their members will act as key factors for the survival and expansion of the collective action. Moreover, the conclusion is that the external actors might both, limit (by acting dishonest) or encourage (by generating rewards) the organization's expansion potential.



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Collective Action, Gender Dynamics and the Constraints for Scaling Up Women Initiatives in Rural Mexico: the Case of "El Color de la Tierra" an Indigenous collective Initiative in Western Mexico

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Introduction

Collective action often organized through the building of cooperatives is one of the most common types of social resistance and solidarity in rural Mexico. Peasants use these approaches as tactics for gaining access to basic services (capital, extension, fair markets health and education) (Hellin, Lundy, & Meijer, 2009). Collective action can provide a more inclusive path to development, build resilience and has the capacity to link peasants with institutions and markets, and, often, grant them access to other levels among society, e.g. by promoting social mobility. Local collective actions, under the lens of the Social Solidarity Economic (SSE) are an alternative to cope with the problems peasants in rural areas (excluded actors) are facing. The main feature of such initiatives is their no-capitalist objective, but the aim of communal wealth of the members and the society. They are based on democratic decision-making process (one member one vote), and a vision of surplus reinvestment for their further expansion, or the creation and expansion of initiatives that share their social goals (Coraggio, 2011)

Similar to many other Latin American countries, Mexico's macro-economic policies have shifted towards free trade and industrialization of the agricultural sector. This orientation has been favouring agro-business over small producers, who are increasingly forced towards peri-urban areas and emigration (Barquera, Rivera-Dommarco, & Gasca-García, 2001). Large stretches of, the Mexican countryside suffers from extreme poverty, marginalization, food insecurity and natural resource degradation (Toledo, Alarcón-Chaires, & Barón, 2002) (King, Adler, & Grieves, 2012).

Consequently, the Mexican countryside is facing a feminization process. Due to the male-dominated migration (to the USA and cities) (Bacon 2008 pp. 51) and the entry of men to higher paying jobs (remaining in the same place), women in rural areas have taken the tasks of food production and resources management (Perea, 2012). The aforementioned situation, coupled with gender inequalities, and discrimination of women demands prompt solutions targeting rural women. The social aspects of collective initiatives have been seen as particularly important for women enhancing solidarity, and women's ability to overcome different forms of gender exploitation, as well as, productive constraints faced by small producers (Agarwal 2010 and 2011) (Mayoux, 1995). Moreover, Agarwal 2011, argues that reducing the inequalities and discrimination rural women face will increase the agricultural production potentials, and hence the overall food availability in countries, regions, and globally. Moreover, by increasing the women's bargaining power future generation's well being will also be improved (Agarwal 2011).

¹ This paper is based on empirical data from the first field trip done by Carolina Contreras Arias, PhD student at the University of St. Gallen. The results here presented are part of her research project. For any questions, please contact at carolina.contreras@unisg.ch

Through the study of a women-collective action both topics can be analysed; the asymmetrical gender relations that negatively impact the sustainable development of rural areas, and the constraints small producers face as a result of the capitalist economic orientation in place. Likewise, conclusions about how consistent or contradictory the collective action is, in the sense of inclusiveness, gender equity, empowerment and sustainability with SSE.

For the purpose of this paper, I examined a cooperative-like organization from a rural region of western Mexico (Cuzalapa, Jalisco). The aim is to reconstruct this initiative of collective action in order to find out how it contributes to the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) discussion. By examining the tensions rural Mexican women face as a result of partaking in collective action and engaging in efforts for participatory change, I intend to question the limits of SSE, examining why they are so frequently unable to generate greater impact. I further expect to contribute to the discourse on how SSE contributes to sustainable development in the rural communities.

Methods

The study was carried out in Cuzalapa, an indigenous community located in Western Mexico. The research subject was a cooperative-like organization called "*Organización Color de la Tierra*". Altogether, the organization is comprised of 15 associated women. The research, was done through the use of participant observations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010), semi-structured interviews, open interviews, and focus groups adapted from (Pretty, 1995). The semi-structured questionnaires as well as the guiding questions for the open interviews were designed based on the Livelihood Approach framework for analysis developed by the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Advisory Committee of the Department of International Development (DFID) (Scoones, 1998) (Krishna, 2009)

In a fieldwork of eight weeks, I spent at least three days at each member's home. During the three days, observations about: the gender division of labour, power relations, household dynamics, and infrastructure were done. In addition, the women were interviewed; they answered a semi-structured and an open interview. Additionally, 13 participatory observations during events (see page 4) were done and 14 external actors² were interviewed. Field notes on informal talks and spontaneous events were taken, and all interviews were recorded, the majority of the events were video taped, and observations were registered with notes. Some informal talks were also recorded.

Results obtained from this study should not be generalized as a shared reality. They deeply explain the situation and the reality of the organization and its members in stake. Yet, through the examination and reconstruction of this local experience, further discussion about the potentials and limits of SSE expansion are made possible.

"Organización Color de la Tierra"

The initiative operates in a marginalized indigenous community; Cuzalapa, Jalisco, Mexico. This region is one of the eight poorest regions of the state (CENEVAL 2010). The main economic activity is subsistence agriculture. The organization started as a grassroot-women initiative intended to endure the situation of poorness and

² External actors are any actors that do not belong to the organization and/or the community, but there are involved on its development. For example, clients, suppliers, trainers, or representatives of any institution (non-governmental and Governmental Organizations (NGO's GO's).

marginalization that characterized the region. Based on indigenous traditions of shared responsibility, mutual obligation and communal stewardship³, the women started a group eleven years ago. It began as an embroidery group, organized by Rosa (the group leader), she started by showing girls (between 8 and 12 years) to embroidery and to market their products in the community. As time passes, students form the University of Guadalajara (UDG), who were doing research in the region, started to demand their products, and, as the demand increased, the girl's moms joined to group to help them with the production. At the end, the girls left, and the women stayed in the group and started to produce other things for sale. Coffee was a traditional crop from the region, but due to the international prices decreases its production stopped, nevertheless the women decided to try to produce and sell coffee again. With support from the UDG they started by commercializing it in the near tourist regions. As the coffee demand increased the women, needed to improve their infrastructure (machinery and facilities), and so they applied for some governmental projects. Due to several projects, they got the machinery and support for the facilities purchase and construction where they are actually operating. They base their agricultural production on traditional knowledge, cultural practices and organic principles of food production in agriculture, making use of local resources. The main activity is the production, transformation and commercialization of local products as well as ecotourism.

The paper is organized as follows: I first, intent to describe the tensions rural Mexican women, from the studied area, face as a result of partaking in a collective organized action. Then, I present the rewards women consider they gain from the organization. Afterwards, I try to explain how women take decisions on being or not active within the organizational activities, and, at the end, the discussions, and conclusions are presented.

Tensions that rural Mexican women face as a result of partaking in collective actions

Women, who form part of a collective action, face tensions with different groups of society. These tensions influence their daily life and activities, but also have an impact on their personal development, and the development of their enterprises. In the community, tensions mainly arise when the women do not comply with what it is considered to be the "proper role". I divided the tensions into three kinds: first the intra-familiar tensions, second, the intra-organizational tensions, and third, tensions with external actors.

The "women's proper role" in the community of Cuzalapa

In this section I divided the active women developed in accordance to the three roles proposed by Caroline O.N. Moser on her paper "Gender planning in the Third World" (Moser, 1989, p. 1801); reproductive, productive and community managing work. In the community it is assumed that women's primary responsibility is to the home and children. They are responsible for the childbearing and rearing (reproductive work). Typical female home-activities include: making *tortillas*, cleaning the house, food preparation, washing and ironing the clothes and pets care. Typical male home-activities include: making the fire, fix broken things, carry heavy stuff, building house rooms and

³ The SSE common operating principles; participation, solidarity and innovation, voluntary involvement and autonomy, and the collective dimension are very similar to the Mexican indigenous organizing principles within the communities. See for example: "*Usos y Costumbres*" (Adler, 2012). Therefore, in many cases, the informal organization of collective initiative is quite common, and understandable for indigenous communities, and works as the SS describes it should (Fonteneau et al., 2011, pp. 27–28).

driving (if they have a car). Moreover, the women are responsible of all activities that concern the familiar well being (health, education, and nutrition); caring of the sick (children and older people) and assisting to school or to governmental subsidies meetings. Aside from the household responsibilities women play a secondary role in the agricultural activities. First, they take care of their own garden plantations of fruits vegetables and medical plants, and in some cases chicken and pigs. And, second, they help their partner in the harvest, irrigation, land preparation, and any other activity supervised by the male.

In contrast, men in the community basically work their own lands, and sometimes they get jobs as laborers in the construction, in the mining or in the agribusiness sector.

Concerning social and community activities (community management work); women are more likely to participate if the communal activity concerns education, nutrition or health and mainly as volunteers. For example, all the women interviewed were four times a month responsible for preparing the pupils breakfast and once a week for cleaning the school. In contrast, men are more likely to participate in political movements in the region, where they receive money and/or social recognition.

Apart from all the “invisible”⁴ activities and home duties, the women from the organization are expected to comply with their job activities (productive work). For example;

- A one working day per week at the cooperative (from 10:00 to 18:00), during this day two women have to clean the establishment, attend the shops (the organization’s shop and the grocery shop), and if required, give explanatory tours to the clients. They should also keep a daily sales and inventory control register in both shops. In addition, they are responsible of drying, cleaning, peeling, milling, and roasting the coffee and/or the *mojote*⁵ whatever activity is required for that day. Also, they are responsible for producing, packing and labeling, all other products. This includes: the *mojote pipian*⁶, *pinole*⁷, and the coffee, that the cooperative produces itself, as well as the products that they merely distribute such as Roselle flower⁸ and honey⁹. In addition to their one-day per week obligation, the women must meet other duties with certain regularity which include the following:
- Hosting tourist/non-tourist groups: Seven or more women (depending on the visiting group size) have to prepare the meal for the group (according to the food supply the currently have access to). They also have to prepare individual and group goods for sale. When the group arrives, it is received with coffee and cake, and then taken to the production facilities and to the organic coffee

⁴ The “invisible” activities according to Caroline O.N. Moser are the not remunerated, and not socially recognized activities that women perform, see Caroline O.N. Moser (Moser, 1989, pp. 1801).

⁵ Mojote (*Brosimum alicastrum*): Tree of the genus *Brosimum*, family of *Moraceae*, division of angiosperms, including in the *Ficus* genus and mulberry trees. It is endemic to Mesoamerica: from Mexico to Peru. The fruit is a 2-3 cm sweet eatable drupe with one to three seeds are roasted and milled to produce flour or a coffee kind drink. They are rich in tryptophan. The crust, the leaves, the fruit and the seeds were and are used in the traditional medicine and religious rituals in Mexico. Mojote is considered to be endangered specie.

⁶ Pipian: Traditional spice sauce or stew in Mexico. Basically made of pumpkin seeds and maize.

⁷ Pinole: Traditional sweet in Mexico. Basically made of milled maize, sugar and cinnamon.

⁸ Roselle flower (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), is a species of hibiscus native to the old world tropics used for the production of tee and as an infusion. In Mexico, the flower is dried and, more commonly, used as a beverage. It is also used for jams and national sweets.

⁹ Distributing products are in this case, products that are not directly produced nor transformed by the members of the group. They are bough in grater amounts to other producers of the region, and sold with the organization’s label.

plantations. A presentation about the organization follows. The visit ends with a meal. The tour takes in average 4 hours.

- Monthly meetings: Every 15th of the month the women meet to discuss: the monthly financial situation, problems within the organization, future modifications in any sense (product prices, purchase of material), and future activities (trainings, conferences, meetings etc.). Moreover, at the meeting, the distribution on the monthly gain takes place as well as the decision on the amount left for the organization's saving fond is taken.
- Participation in workshops, trainings and courses, in and outside the region: Sometimes, the women present their products and/or their organization in conferences or congresses. Some other times, they give workshops about the usages of the *mojote*. Frequently, the women are invited to participate in workshops on a variety of subjects, which can range from the use of organic compost to the production of jam, to marketing and financial matters. As these trainings might or might not take place at their facilities, the women are sometimes, request to travel.
- Sales outside the region: Once or twice a month, women sell their products at the University Center of the South Cost (CUCSUR) from the UDG in Autlán, Jalisco.
- Spontaneous meetings: are called when it is needed to discuss immediate decisions or solutions for unexpected circumstances. For example, pests' problems (in the nearest regions of the coffee plantation), unexpected sickness of any member, events coming up soon and so on.
- Individual production of trademark sale products: Apart from the products of the cooperative, the women also make certain goods at their home. The production of these goods will depend on the women's personal skills, and the inputs they have access to. These products include: seasonal-fruit jams, tostadas, embroidered clothes and napkins, Roselle sweets, eggs, fried plantains, sweet and salty popcorn, maize cookies, fruits and vegetables.
- *Tianguis Orgánico*¹⁰: About once a month, the women participate in a *tianguis organico*. Organic producers¹¹ from the nearest regions get together to commercialize their products. At the end, producers engage in barter (*trueque*). The main intentions are to diversify their own diets, to share knowledge (on products preparation, medical usages etc.), to save money, and to maintain the *trueque* tradition.

Table 1. Enlists the activities women are expected to perform within the organization, and it shows, which of the activities break the local traditional women's role and which

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