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SEEKING FOOD AND SEEKING MONEY:

CHANGING PRODUCTIVE RELATIONS IN A HIGHLAND MEXICAN COMMUNITY

by

George A. Collier

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United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Tel. (022) 798.84.00/798.98.50
Fax (022) 740.07.91
Telex 41.29.62 UNO CH

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Preface

The debate on adjustment-related food policy, and particularly on issues of food pricing and marketing reform, is all too frequently conducted at a relatively high level of abstraction. Positions are defended with very little reference either to the real political constraints surrounding policy formulation or to the complexity of local societies upon which policies eventually impinge. In the end, however, policies are determined by these social and political variables.

In an effort to lay the groundwork for a study of Mexican maize pricing policy, UNRISD organized a seminar on the role of maize in various kinds of rural social settings. The seminar, which took place from 3 to 5 January 1990 in Tepoztlán, Mexico, was co-sponsored by the Centro Tepoztlán and funded by the Ford Foundation. It brought together some 25 social scientists currently at work in the Mexican countryside and involved them in a dialogue with macro-economists and policy makers. The purpose was to build tentative bridges between the macro- and the micro-levels of food policy analysis, setting out from the village or rural region.

The following paper, by Professor George Collier of the Department of Anthropology of Stanford University, was one of the contributions discussed at the Tepoztlán seminar. It deals with the Tzotzil-speaking district of Zinacantan in highland Chiapas - like many other regions of southern Mexico, an area of indigenous communities with a distinctive social structure long based upon ranking by age and ceremonial participation. Despite this cultural singularity, the agricultural economy of Zinacantan has nevertheless been increasingly integrated into regional and national markets, as maize farmers in the highlands have during certain periods migrated to lowland cattle areas, where they have cleared rented fields for maize cultivation, and as the Tzotzil have also periodically been absorbed into and expelled from the wage labour force of lowland farms and cities.

The contribution of the paper rests particularly upon the ability of the author to document the profound changes which have occurred in Zinacanteco society over the course of the past 30 years, and especially in response to the oil boom of the late 1970s. New opportunities for making money in off-farm occupations during that period of accelerated growth played havoc with the traditional economy and society of the district, favouring the young over the old, men over women, and creating a new class of relatively wealthy merchants, truckers and moneylenders. At the same time, maize cultivation was transformed from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive venture, increasingly dependent upon purchased fertilizers and herbicides to maintain productivity upon lands no longer fallowed or rotated.

As the collapse of the oil boom and subsequent economic crisis curtailed possibilities to earn a living outside agriculture, and outside Zinacantan, the cultivation of maize gained new importance in the economy of the district. But within the context of the late 1980s a growing number of families could no longer afford to farm: to grow maize in the sea of contiguous plots already conditioned to the use of herbicides and fertilizer required a monetary investment beyond their means. At the same time, interest rates were very high and the guaranteed price of corn, established by the Mexican government to regulate the maize market, was being kept low in an effort to combat inflation.

Collier thus documents marked polarization in Zinacantan: the growth of a new "semi-proletariat" unable to afford maize production and the concentration of wealth in the hands of those (particularly among younger generations) who were able to accumulate capital during the boom years and can now obtain interest on loans or savings. It is the latter group which has continued to farm without losses (and apparently with profits roughly equivalent to those obtained from the alternative venture of lending money for interest), even during the recent period of low maize prices. And it is this group which would most benefit from higher real maize prices, given its greater potential productivity and capacity to rent additional land.

The paper raises a number of questions for policy makers and others concerned with problems of food security in Mexico. How can the process of marginalization of relatively poorer and more traditional farmers in regions like highland Chiapas be slowed or halted? Can alternatives be found to the growing dependence upon chemical inputs, which are expensive for the farmer to purchase and increasingly difficult for the state to subsidize? Or can maize prices be raised sufficiently to make cultivation by small farmers, requiring credit for purchased inputs during a period of high interest rates, even minimally viable?

Within the society so carefully depicted in this paper, there are a number of groups which have been partially protected from the market by the nature of traditional livelihood arrangements: they have been accustomed to "seek food" rather than to "seek money", through various forms of exchange not immediately dependent upon relative prices. The elderly, the widowed and orphaned, and many women are to be found in this category. Monetization is, however, proceeding apace; and as these people join much of the rest of the population in having to purchase maize, high consumer prices can only harm them.

Dilemmas such as these form the background for other papers presented at the Tepoztlán seminar, which are currently being edited for publication within the framework of the UNRISD programme on adjustment-related food policy, co-ordinated by Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara.

Dharam Ghai
Director

June 1990

Table of Contents

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Introduction

When the variable impact of food pricing and marketing policy on rural people is discussed, analysts are likely to point out differences between segments of the rural population engaged in modern commercial agriculture and those still forming part of the peasant economy. They are, however, much less likely to remember that forms and relations of production vary considerably within peasant agriculture. It is therefore important to take a close look at how social relations are changing in specific local contexts before coming to conclusions concerning the implications of policy for various kinds of rural inhabitants. That is the purpose of the following discussion, which centres around an analysis of the evolution of productive relations among the Zinacanteco Indians of southeastern Mexico.

At the heart of the discussion lies the question of the changing nature of maize agriculture. For the Zinacantecos, Tzotzil-speaking Indians of highland Chiapas, livelihood has intermittently depended upon intercropping maize, beans and other minor foodcrops in a complex system of cultivation known as the *milpa*. Tzotzil families were *milpa* cultivators *par excellence* in the 1960s, when Cancian and I first studied Zinacanteco agriculture (Cancian, 1965, 1972; Collier, 1975). But in the 1970s, especially after the oil-led development boom got under way in the presidency of Lopez Portillo, Zinacantecos increasingly turned away from *milpa* to wage labour. By 1981, when I surveyed occupations in the Zinacanteco hamlet of Apas, men had virtually abandoned their entrepreneurial farming of *milpa* on rented lowland ranches. While some men still farmed highland *ejido* or communal lands, they farmed not for sale but only for their own use, and on a much smaller scale than before. Instead, most had turned to unskilled but well-remunerated wage labour in construction, on huge hydroelectric projects and in housing in cities as far as Villahermosa. Others had gone into long-distance wholesaling and retailing of flowers, fruits and vegetables. One man in this out-of-the-way hamlet owned a truck (as did several wealthy and politically well-connected Zinacantecos in settlements on the major highway), and was organizing a union of truckers to obtain a state-authorized concession to transport produce and people from Apas to San Cristobal and Tuxtla Gutierrez.

After the 1982 economic crisis, when further dam building was put off and construction abated, Zinacantecos returned to making *milpa* while continuing, nonetheless, in wagework and commercial vending. Yet the agriculture had been transformed from what it used to be, requiring and giving returns to capital in a manner that works to the advantage of a newly emerging class in the community. Before, Zinacantecos had deployed household members in labour-intensive cultivation, giving advantage to elders who could subordinate youthful kin. Today, as Zinacantecos purchase and use chemical fertilizer and weed sprays, their farming has become much less labour-intensive and more to the advan-

tage of those who control commercial transport and capital. The work of the field hand has become more of a commodity to be bought and sold, to the advantage of a class of youthful men who have brought new wealth - derived from construction contracting, commerce, and trucking - into their farming.

Let us look at this process of change in some detail, taking up the analysis at the point, at the end of the Cardenas presidency in 1940, when land reform made it possible for virtually all Zinacanteco families to specialize in the labour-intensive farming of *milpa*.

Zinacantecos in a Changing Regional Economy

During the early decades of this century, access to land among the Tzotzil was very unequally distributed. In the hamlet of Apas, where much of my own research has been carried out, only a handful of wealthy families held tracts of "communal" land before 1940, and other Zinacantecos had to work for them. But in 1940 almost all married men in Apas received ejidal land, substantially ameliorating differences among them based on property (see figure 1).[1] And for the first time every Apas household farmed, although some poorer men continued to work for others as well.

1. I surveyed land ownership in 1967 on the basis of detailed aerial photographs, which I used to reconstruct the history of land ownership and use of all Apas land back to the 1930s (see Collier, 1975). I updated my land parcel database in 1989.

Figure 1
The Changing Distribution of Property in Apas, Zinacantan