

***'Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty',  
Workshop #5 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', Mexico, San Pablo  
Centre, Oaxaca City, 9 July 2018***

Regional leads & organisers: Ben Smith (University of Warwick) and Rasheny Lazcano (Biblioteca Juan de Cordova in the Centro Cultural San Pablo)

Poverty Research Network organisers and participants: Julia McClure (University of Glasgow) and Rosie Doyle (University of Warwick)

Representatives of civic associations and local NGOs:

- Sofia Robles Hernández from *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (SER) an established organisation with more than thirty years' experience working with a network of civic associations and groups and communities in the Sierra Mixe.
- Kiado Cruz from *Servicios Universidades y Redes de Conocimientos* (SURCO) a new association developing alternative Higher Education courses and working to defend freedom of expression online.
- Gubidxa Guerrero Luis and Rosa Beatriz Morales Ruiz from *Comité Melandre* a civic association working in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to re-establish community networks in the rapidly-growing city of Juchitán as a means of protection and defence against the escalation of violence in the region.
- Luna Marán from *Agenda Guelatao* in Guelatao a small town in the Sierra Norte. *Agenda Guelatao* runs a range of cultural projects aimed at providing a space for different voices in cinematic and cultural production and providing communal spaces for enjoying art, photography and film produced by children and young people. The organisation is run very much along the lines of the concept of *comunalidad* developed by Luis Martinez Luna, from Guelatao and Floriberto Diaz Robles from Tlahui among others.
- Also present was the Mixe translator, musician and multi-media artist Konk Diaz Robles from Tlahui.

Workshop theme and aims

Community building and community action have been at important to many of the different sub-themes of the poverty research network workshops but here there was a particular focus on the strategies and purposes of communities in social assistance and resistance. As part of this discussion, the workshop explored the poverty research network's key theme of the uses of history and the ways in which history can be a tool for social justice. During this workshop researchers of the history of community strategies of social assistance, Julia McClure and Rosie Doyle, met with representatives from civil associations and NGOs to explore the local visions of global poverty and to discuss the roles of history in community action.

The workshop began with general introductions. Julia McClure and Rosie Doyle provided a general overview of the aims of the project 'Beyond Development' and outlined some specific questions to guide the discussion in the workshop. The workshop had a particular focus on community organising as a strategy for protecting local access to natural resources, political autonomy, legal protection and community development.

Panel 1: Historical Perspectives

Since first contact with Europeans in the sixteenth century, indigenous groups have formed communities as a strategy for resistance and survival, and as a means of negotiating the distribution of resources within socio-political systems of asymmetrical power relations.

Conceptions of poverty and visions of ideal way of life have gone through many transitions and transformed the focus of these different communities. In this first panel McClure and Doyle presented examples from their research on the formation of communities of social assistance and interpretations of poverty and uses of history by these communities.

McClure presented on how the Franciscan Order developed a particular ideology of poverty which they sought to translate in the Americas in the Early Colonial Period. McClure considered the legacies of the Franciscans' translation of Amerindians as poor in the sixteenth century. She also introduced the associated formation of penitential confraternities, which provided a framework for building communities of social assistance. Doyle continued with the theme of the ambivalent politics of religious communities and presented a paper on the aims of Liberation Theologians in the 1970s to engage with social issues in order to overcome issues of social inequality. Doyle considered how these theologians used particular historical moments in their discourse about the relationship between people, the land and the Church.

#### Panel 2: Overview of the work of civic associations and NGOs

The second session was dedicated to presentations of the projects of the civic associations and NGOs all of which are involved in a broad range of initiatives and projects. Representatives selected specific initiatives to present.

*Comité Melandre* presented initiatives that they developed as a response to the 8.2 Earthquake of 9 September 2017 with an epicentre near the city of Juchitan, Tehuantepec where they are based. These projects were aimed at providing relief at the same time as revitalizing the local economy that had been affected by the damage to infrastructure in the earthquake. The projects were shaped by the contours of particular local needs, conditions, and cultures.

In this region of Oaxaca few communities are completely self-sufficient but are rather interdependent in that the economy depends on trading and exchanging goods and services. Considering this, *Comité Melandre* launched its '*Canasta Básica Istmeña*' project, which provided families with a food hamper with sufficient basic food stuffs produced in the region to feed a family for a week. This *canasta básica* also helped provide a source of income for example for fishermen, people who smoke and dry fish and seafood and consumption and people (principally women) who produce crispy tortillas known as *totopos*.

During the earthquake, many of the traditional ovens or *comiscales* used to make *totopos* were broken, as were many of the workshops used to produce them. This left households without cooking facilities and in some cases, where selling *totopos* and other foodstuffs was a family business, without income. *Comité Melandre* launched '*adopta un horno*', an initiative which invited donors to adopt an oven and raised sufficient funds to reconstruct the workshops and produce and distribute ovens to families in need. It also helped revive an interest in traditional forms of cooking and food heritage among people whose families had once produced food in *comiscales*, but this had fallen by the wayside in previous generations. It is hoped that this will provide a number of women with economic independence and may also have some health benefits but primarily it has the effect of reviving the local economy. The initial aim was to distribute around 350 *comiscales* but the response to the appeal has been so successful that more than 1500 have been distributed up until now.

*Comité Melandre* has also developed further initiatives aimed at assisting the position of women within local economies. *Comité Melandre* launched another project which asked donors to buy a *huipil* (an embroidered blouse traditionally worn in the region) for 2000 pesos a piece. This not only provided artisans with a source of income but also meant that the association were able to pay craftspeople to repair the looms used for weaving *huipiles* which had also been damaged in the earthquake. As in the case of '*adopta un horno*' this project helped artisans at all levels of production revive their workshops and practices and it also provided women with independent income.

The combined outcome of these projects is to raise awareness of traditional forms of craft and food production, to revitalise the local economy and to encourage people to buy from local producers rather than in the supermarket. Gubidxa and Beatriz underlined that the learning process was very revealing as not only did they learn about the chain of craftspeople involved in the production of local products, but it also illustrated how local historical knowledge and memory of forms of organization allowed them to deal with some challenging circumstances to improve their economic situation.

Next Sofia Robles Hernández presented the work of *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe*, an organisation which provides a base for a network of communities and organisations throughout the Mixe region. Robles Hernández began her presentation by stating: '*Yo puedo ser pobre pero me siento feliz.*' This statement struck at the heart of certain global discourses around poverty and development.

Robles Hernandez highlighted tensions between perspectives of communities and mainstream economic development. Robles Hernandez began with an overview of the effects of the building of the main highway into the Sierra Mixe and the development of electric lighting. While such initiatives may seem like economic progress, there were many associated problems with accidents caused in the construction of the highways and fires caused by electrical accidents. Significantly, the development of the highway made it even more vital for the people of the Mixe region to protect their resources. People started organising in the region to find approaches to these issues.

The first incarnation of this civil society movement was as *Comité Recursos Rurales Mixe*, and then it changed to *Asamblea Regional de Autoridades Mixe*. In 1988 it was formed as an *Asociacion Civil, Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* as there was a need to consolidate and continue with the work so far. The work of this civil society association has been to make claims against the government and raise complaints. SER has also managed and overseen facilitation of arbitration and legal advice for forwarding claims and complaints and negotiating land claims. It has been committed to defining and raising awareness of important rights and finding avenues for protecting those rights. Robles Hernández identified the main objective of SER as being that of recognising the rights of indigenous people against discrimination. She mentioned another organisation working in the Sierra Mixe run by Jaime Martínez.

Robles Hernández gave an overview of the history of several important moments for the normative recognition of the rights of indigenous people. Robles Hernández explained that the state constitution of Oaxaca was the first to include an article on the rights of indigenous people with the *Ley de derechos de los pueblos*. In particular, Robles Hernández mentioned the inclusion of the recognition of the right to self-determination for indigenous peoples in the Mexican national constitution in 1995, and the normative regulation on internal systems of *usos y costumbres* in 2012.

Robles Hernández highlighted the importance of understanding the law in relation to self-determination and indigenous rights and identified creating a network of lawyers and advisors as being part of the work of SER. Robles Hernández used this context to illustrate how notions of poverty and wealth have changed since the 1970s. In the past, she argued, people would have considered themselves rich if they were able to feed themselves and sustain their family through cultivating crops and keeping livestock. Members of the community with cattle would have been considered particularly wealthy. Nowadays, she suggests that rural people are considered poor even though they can still provide for themselves. This is because they do this without a salary and the capacity to buy material goods. Robles Hernández suggested that material markers such as ownership of a car or a brick or breeze block house as opposed to one build with adobe were now more important. She talked about the need to defend and demand rights for indigenous communities and human rights as well as developing projects

supporting agricultural production in a context in which around 70% of the population globally live from agriculture.

Robles Hernández highlighted the differences between urban and rural poverty, discussing the limitation of projects of the Mexican state to support agriculture. She mentioned the 1989-90 *Plan de Desarrollo Agrario* which established a consultation in communities but was particularly slow at providing support and when it came this support consisted mainly of providing industrial fertilizers. In the face of these government projects SER organised around the need to protect local seeds and crops that were endangered by commercial agriculture, monoculture and the use of fertilizers. In the lower Mixe region commercial agriculture is prevalent and maize is grown for wholesale. The challenge was to maintain conventional agriculture and use local seeds and plants. There was a move to develop and defend food sovereignty and a local economy that was not so dependent on external forces. This was achieved through the development of local markets.

Robles Hernández explained that the recovery and reinvigoration of local languages has been another key element of the work of SER. Local authorities began to ask why the younger generation was choosing to migrate away from the region. It was noted that loss of linguistic ability was one of the outcomes of this outmigration. The project SEVILEM (*Semana de Vida y Lengua Mixe*) was established to promote language learning through the development of a festival organised around an official week of *Ayuujk* (Mixe language). These festivals were developed between 1983 and 1986 and then taken up by SER in 1994. As a part of these projects a lot of locals who had undergone higher education and were working in various professions; anthropologists, sociologists, biologists etc, returned to give workshops to the volunteers of SER and SEVILEM.

Robles Hernández outlined another major area of the work of SER: defending women's rights and interests. The work in this area revolves around raising awareness about women's rights among women themselves, providing training in a range of skills and facilitating organising capacity. Among the training given were workshops in the preparation of nutritious food using local produce. Another aspect of this work is the creation of networks of women's organization at regional and state levels. These organisations are now networked in the *Asamblea de Mujeres Indígenas de Oaxaca* through which a lot of initiatives have been proposed. SER has developed a broad network of lawyers supporting the needs of women although lawyers rarely stay with the organization for longer than 8 years or so. However, the participation of lawyers in the projects of SER means that women and volunteers have accumulated a significant understanding of rights.

Robles Hernández went on to discuss issues related to government-funded projects in the region. She mentioned the *Secretaría Indígena* established by Andres Manuel López Obrador, the centre-left politician who won the presidential election in July 2018 and the IEPCO which had links to the centre left Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD.) Within the *Asamblea de los Derechos Indígenas* the *Comité de Derechos Indígenas de Oaxaca* wanted to become an independent *Asociación Civil* (Registered Civil Society Organisation.) However, it was later dismantled. Another major aspect of SER's work is to work closely with the local indigenous authorities or *asambleas* mediating land disputes with neighbouring communities as well as helping local indigenous authorities defend their lands against extractivist projects. Because the voluntary *cargos* and administrative positions are held on a rotational basis and many only last a year this process of training in rights needs to be ongoing. The aim is to prioritize training young people who have different aspirations and ambitions from the older generation. The idea is to inspire younger members of the community to remain and become involved in decision-making by taking up *cargos* rather than leaving to earn money, to study in the US and build a bigger house. SER aims to pressure the government to take into account the needs of local communities in their policy-making. Robles Hernandez gave the example of

the PROSPERA project that handed out financial support to women without involving them in a process of awareness raising and training. SER's projects aim to raise awareness of the limitations of these kinds of projects.

The presentation stimulated a discussion which revolved around different relationships to the concept of indigeneity. SER seemed more comfortable with engaging with the term and various laws and initiatives aimed at promoting indigenous rights whereas Comité Melandre saw it as more problematic. In Guelatao they don't say indigenous but *Serranos* and in Juchitán they say *Dixazá* (in Zapotec).

### Panel 3: Overview of the work of civic associations and NGOs

In the afternoon the remaining representatives of the civil society associations attending provided outlines of their work and recent projects. Kiado Cruz provided a brief overview of the work of SURCO which uses social media activism to create networks for journalists to promote freedom of expression. SURCO also runs community radios in the Sierra Sur and it is developing Higher Education courses based in the region.

The workshop participants then heard from Luna Marán from *Agenda Guelatao* presented three areas of their work in the Sierra Norte. *Campamento Audiovisual Itinerante* (CAI), the *Calenda Audiovisual* and *Cine Too*. *Agenda Guelatao* have been running for seven years and their activities revolve around the communal development of cultural production, particularly film and photography. Marán started by engaging with the themes of the workshop and reflecting that the issue is not poverty but rather wealth and what it is that people think it means to be rich. The Audiovisual Training Camp (*Campamento Audiovisual Itinerante* CAI) she argued is dedicated to facilitating young people in telling and photographing and filming their own stories so that among the many images that they consume daily they can see themselves and their lifeways reflected. She suggested that rather than seeing wealth as something to do with money and consumption the projects she runs are dedicated to ensuring that the young people from Guelatao and the surrounding region are aware that they are growing up in an area that is rich in the capacity to organise and that they are aware that being who they are and understanding where they are from is important. The aim of the audiovisual training is to produce images that pay homage to the forms of organisation and lifeways passed down by previous generations and recognising the value of those in opposition to material aspirations. She highlighted the importance on the responsibility to others placed on the individual by local forms of communal organising and suggested that the wealth of organisational knowledge in the region contributed to resilience and effective responses to the September earthquake that may not have been possible elsewhere. She said that the philosophy behind the projects of *Agenda Guelatao* were that people should be able to enjoy audiovisual culture through community cinema and thinking about other possible forms of cinema production and alternative forms of wealth. The CAI project extends beyond Oaxaca and has a wide network of collaborators. There has been a major training event per year for the past three years.

*Agenda Guelatao* has also established a hostel for people attending and participating in the CAI events, and this has become a good example of a successful, self-sustaining micro-business. Another project, the *Calenda Audiovisual* or *Aqui Cine* aims to establish community cinema clubs and develop a network of alternative cinemas showing films and stories developed by and for people in Mexico with themes that are of interest to the community. Marán pointed out that about 80% of Mexican films, made at the taxpayer's expense are rarely shown within Mexico. The aim of CAI and the cinema clubs is to tell local Mexican stories that reflect the diversity of experience of being from Oaxaca, Yucatan, Tijuana etc. Another project is *Cine Too*, a micro-business consisting of a small cinema with a cafe that, like the hostel, covers some of the costs of the project. 30% of the costs of running the cinema is

covered by proceeds from the cafe, the rest is made up by a team of volunteers. The cinema depends on donations of films to provide regular screenings for local children and those attending a local boarding school and hosts cultural events such as concerts from the local bands known as *philarmonias*. One of the aims of these micro-businesses is to provide employment that allows members of the community to stay in Guelatao rather than migrating to find work in the city or further afield. This is important as part of communal organising through *asambleas* requires adults to perform voluntary service on councils dedicated to local government, economy and security. These voluntary positions are known as *cargos*.

After the presentation the discussion revolved around the importance of representation in images and film and historical memory and the central aim of the project being that young people recognise themselves in the images that they see around them and learn to value their own lifestyle. The aim of developing a more varied repertoire of children's films with this in mind was underlined.

Funding was discussed and the importance of independent projects was underlined as state funding often places limitations of forms of production. Another major aim of these projects that was underlined was the development of more democratic production processes. Marán explained the importance of collective financing and the collective voluntary labour, with film-makers, photographers, technicians and support staff volunteering their time. She stated that this was almost more valuable than monetary financing. A major take away from the presentation and the discussion was the point that measuring wealth via statistics and wealth indexes overlooks the significant value of communal labour and organising and the cultural value and wealth this brings to the community.

Another interesting area of discussion came in differing attitudes and uses of rights terminology. Kiado emphasised the importance of thinking about exercising rights rather than defending them or making appeals and claims to the state. The work of SURCO engages less with laws on rights and aims to develop a critical analysis and revision of the ideas of *comunalidad*.

### Regional Visits

10 July: Visit to *Agenda Guelatao*, Guelatao, Sierra Norte, Oaxaca to see the project *Cine Too* Researchers from the PRN and the San Pablo centre and representatives of *Comité Melandre* and the workshop translators visited Guelatao to see the infrastructure of the *Agenda Guelatao* project and discuss the workings of the project with its architects and directors. In addition to a visit to the cinema and cafe space members of the group participated in a rich and in-depth discussion comparing the different forms of community organising in *asambleas* (assemblies or community councils) in Guelatao, Juchitán and Tlahui and contemplating whether these forms of community action were a conscious reaction to and rejection of globalisation and state intervention.

11 July: Visit to San Mateo del Mar, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca to discuss the work of the bi-lingual school, and the *Casa Mujer Indígena Ikoods* with Beatriz Gutiérrez

Researchers from the PRN and the San Pablo Centre visited this small community which was among the worst affected by the September earthquake to get an idea of the local economy and discuss bilingual education and forms of community organisation with Beatriz Gutiérrez an educator and campaigner who has spent the last thirty years or so working to defend women's and children's rights within the local forms of organisation. The meeting was held in the bi-lingual school which was in the process of being rebuilt. Gutierrez outlined her work which has included working and collaborating with pan-state teachers associations and unions and projects of visiting Liberation Theologians and at times adapting these projects to

local needs or changing them from within. She has also collaborated with pan-Mexican indigenous rights councils emerging from the 1990s and has campaigned locally to have women accepted onto local *asambleas*. She also discussed the presence of international NGOs in the region as part of the relief effort for the earthquake. She named Oxfam and the Catholic charitable organisation Caritas among those working in the region.

12 July: Visit to a number of communities in the Guevea region of the Sierra Mixe near Juchitán, Tehuantepec to accompany the representatives of *Comité Melandre* as they delivered traditional ovens or *comiscales* as part of the project '*adopta un horno*'. Here researchers from the PRN and the San Pablo Centre were able to witness the outcomes of the '*adopta un horno*' project of *Comité Melandre* and get an idea of economic and social workings of the region of Guevea and Juchitán, Tehuantepec. As they delivered the *comiscales* members of *Comité Melandre* explained the ways in which the project was contributing to the local economy. They also discussed the workings of some of the local *asambleas* and how different members of the community negotiated power relations within them. Issues of cohabitation of the initiatives of *Comité Melandre* and the *asambleas* and the state were also discussed. One of the express aims of *Comité Melandre*, to learn from established forms of community organisation to rebuild communities at the level of boroughs or *barrios* in Juchitán, was reiterated. There was also a rich discussion of the use of history for defending regional autonomy and resources and issues of how the economy in the region was discussed.

16 July: Meeting with Kiado Cruz and Oliver Fröhling, the director of SURCO to discuss the work of SURCO in mapping networks, developing alternative higher education courses and defending freedom of expression.

Members of the Poverty Research Network met with the director of SURCO, Oliver Fröhling and Kiado Cruz to discuss various projects including community radio and mapping of earthquake-affected towns and human rights defenders' organisations. Emphasis was placed on the development of alternative Higher Education modules and degrees and the establishment of a university in the Sierra Norte in collaboration with the state university and the UNAM. Opportunities for exchange and SURCO's courses for overseas students were also discussed. There was a particularly fruitful discussion of the limitations of on-line networks.

#### Outcomes

The PRN plans to continue to develop collaborative projects with indigenous communities, local NGOs and cultural centres within the region and is currently developing a working catalogue of civic associations for activists and researchers.

Links:

<http://comitemelendre.blogspot.com/>

<https://surcooaxaca.org/>

<https://www.agendaguelatao.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SERvicios-del-Pueblo-Mixe-AC-251525601562288/>