Mexican Peasant and Indigenous Movements. Adaptation and Resistance to Neoliberalism

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Rural Mexico is experiencing a multidimensional crisis. Although there is much debate with regards to its underlying causes and to the policies required to overcome it, more and more authors from across the political spectrum are referring to the situation in rural Mexico as a crisis. Furthermore, although the roots of this crisis can be traced back to before the neoliberal era, there is no denying that socio-economic and environmental conditions have deteriorated perceptibly in the countryside over the past two decades.

Since neoliberal structural adjustments were carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s, conventional smallholder farming has become largely unviable, due to rising input costs, unavailability of credit and lack of marketing support. There are fewer jobs available in the rural sector and this has spurred on emigration to urban centers and to the United States. Environmental degradation has advanced in multiple forms, including deforestation, soil erosion, water contamination and loss of genetic and biological diversity. In addition, political tensions between the government, organized peasants, indigenous groups and drug cartels have created an atmosphere of insecurity in many rural areas.

What is the policy framework under which this multidimensional crisis has unfolded? What are its dimensions? And, how have peasant and indigenous groups responded? These are the main questions to be addressed in this article. The chapter proceeds as follows. First, Mexico's rural policies are sketched, from the post-World War II period until the present, with emphasis on the structural adjustments carried out in the early 1990s. The next section provides a brief review of the various dimensions of the crisis: economic, social, environmental, gender, cultural and political. The third section analyzes the main responses that have come from below, namely: social movements

of protest and demand, autonomous development, organic farming and fair trade, labour migration, conventional farming, abandoning and renting of land, and the cultivation of illicit crops. The chapter ends with some succinct conclusions, highlighting the demands of Mexico's independent peasant organizations, which constitute an alternative policy agenda oriented towards improving living conditions in marginalized rural communities and achieving food sovereignty on the national level.

The genesis of a crisis

During the post-World War II period, Mexico, like most other Latin American countries, pursued a development strategy of import-substituting industrialization. As part of this strategy, the countryside was assigned the tasks of generating foreign currency, serving as a labour reserve, and providing raw materials for the industrialization process. From a modernization perspective, large-scale private farming was considered to be the most efficient means for providing low-cost food for the burgeoning urban population, as well as agricultural products for the international market. Accordingly, resources were channelled preferentially to "entrepreneurial" farmers, particularly in the northern and western parts of the country, in the form of land, irrigation systems and Green Revolution technology. Land redistribution, a key element of the post-revolutionary social pact, was carried out slowly as a means of maintaining political stability. At the same time, the federal government constructed a series of institutions in order to provide commercially viable farmers with guaranteed producer prices, subsidized agricultural inputs, credit and marketing support.

Although this strategy was tremendously successful in increasing agricultural production during the post-World War II period (between 1940 and 1965 it increased by an average of 4.5 percent per year, resulting in the achievement of food self-sufficiency on the national level), by the late 1960s, a number of cracks began to appear in the system. Agricultural growth stagnated, environmental problems began to affect production, and social unrest mounted around issues of poverty, inequality and ethnic exclusion.

In this context, the Mexican government implemented a number of integrated rural development projects aimed at improving living conditions in the countryside, modernizing peasant agriculture and increasing productivity. The most important of these programmes were *Programa Integral para el Desarrollo Rural* (Investment Program for Rural Development – PIDER), *Coordinación General del Plan Nacional de Zonas Deprimidas y Grupos Marginados* (Na-

tional Plan for Depressed Areas and Marginalized Groups – COMPLAMAR) and *Sistema Alimentaria Mexicana* (Mexican Food System – SAM). These programs were successful in temporarily accelerating agricultural growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in improving social indicators in some parts of the country. However, in hindsight, they were unsustainable due to their high costs and, perhaps more importantly, because of problems of top-down bureaucracy, clientelism and corruption. In any case, they were jettisoned in the wake of the 1982 debt crisis.

During the mid-1980s, the federal government began applying neoliberal policies to the rural sector. However, it was not until Carlos Salinas' presidential term (1988 to 1994) that the bulk of the reforms were put in place. Subsequent administrations have consolidated these reforms. They can be summarized as follows:

a. *Removal of protective trade barriers*. Beginning in the mid-1980s, quotas and tariffs on agricultural imports were gradually reduced, culminating in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which set a 15-year timetable for phasing out remaining protectionist policies.
b. *Dismantling and privatization of state agencies linked to the rural sector*: Dozens of state-owned agencies operating in the countryside were dismantled and privatized, including *Fertilizantes de México* (Mexican Fertilizers – Fertimex), *Productora Nacional de Semillas* (National Seed Producer – Pronase), *Banco Nacional de Crédito Rural* (National Bank for Rural Credit – Banrural) and *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares* (National Company for Popular Subsistence – Conasupo). This last agency was particularly important, since it was in charge of buying, storing and marketing basic grains.
c. *Elimination of guaranteed producer prices, institutional credit and subsidies for agricultural inputs*. With the elimination of Conasupo, guaranteed producer prices no longer made any sense, so they were also eliminated, along with almost all subsidies for agricultural inputs, including not just physical inputs (seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, etcetera) but also financial inputs, most importantly credit and crop insurance.
d. *Decrease in public spending in the rural sector*: Related to these changes, public spending in the rural sector dropped by 70 per cent between 1982 and 2001 (Calva, 2002). Although public spending in the rural sector has increased significantly since 2002 (when massive demonstrations forced the government to commit to more spending), it is still about 60 per cent lower than in 1982 (Chávez, 2008). Moreover, representatives of independent peasant organizations complain of clientelism and point out that increased spending has been channelled mostly to social assistance programmes, as opposed to productive investments.

e. *Liberalization of land markets*. In 1992, changes were made to Article 27 of the Constitution and to the Agrarian Law in order to put an official end to land redistribution and in order to pave the way towards the privatization of the *ejido*.

f. *Targeted social assistance and agricultural subsidy programmes*. In anticipation of some of the adverse consequences to these structural adjustments, the federal government introduced a number of targeted anti-poverty and agricultural subsidy programmes. The three most important are the *Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo* (Program for Direct Support for Agriculture – Procampo), *Adquisición de Activos Productivos* (Acquisition of Productive Assets), and *Oportunidades* (Opportunities). The first two are highly regressive in the sense that large- and medium-scale farmers receive the lion's share of their benefits. The third is Mexico's main anti-poverty programme, which provides direct cash transfers to families living in extreme poverty.

It is not within the scope of this article to analyze these structural reforms and social assistance programs in detail. This has been done elsewhere. Here, I am more interested in the trends that have developed in the context of this policy framework.

A multidimensional crisis

Beginning with a micro-economic analysis, during the neoliberal era, small-scale farmers have been squeezed by higher production costs and lower producer prices. This trend has been well documented since the early 1990s and up until the onset of the global food crisis three years ago. Between 2005 and mid-2008, the international price of basic grains soared, leading some analysts to suggest that this would create more favourable market conditions for Mexico's small-scale farmers. However, what we have seen is that, because of oligopolistic market conditions, these higher prices have only been weakly transmitted to Mexico's small-scale producers.[1] In addition, the cost of agricultural inputs has risen even more steeply than that of basic grains. Fertilizers, in particular, have increased dramatically in cost: González (2008) reports that, between January of 2005 and mid-2008, the cost of nitrogen-based fertilizers increased by over 50 per cent, while potassium-based ones rose by over 200 per cent. As such, it now takes on average three times more agricultural production to buy the same amount of inputs as it did five years ago.

[1] For example, in 2008, farmers in the relatively developed state of Jalisco were only offered 2,487 pesos for a tonne of maize, while the government advertised a producer price of 3,350 pesos per tonne (Partida, 2008).

Under these conditions, the big winners are the handful of large national and transnational corporations that have stepped in to dominate Mexico's internal markets for agricultural inputs and basic grains. Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Minsa and Meseca have been able to extract surplus from Mexico's small-scale farmers on both ends of the production chain: on the input side, by charging exorbitant prices for fertilizers and seeds, and on the output side, by paying below market prices for basic grains and other agricultural produce. In this way, their profits have soared in recent years.[2]

Another problem faced by Mexico's small-scale farmers is their lack of access to institutional credit. Today, only about 15 per cent of Mexican farmers have access to credit for seasonal investment and a paltry five percent to credit for long-term productive investments, and these tend to be the large- and medium-scale farmers (Suárez, 2008). Subsistence and small-scale commercial farmers are only eligible for small amounts of subsidized credit through programmes such as *Crédito a la Palabra*. Under these terms, it has become less commercially viable to produce traditional crops conventionally, leading farmers to diversify their survival strategies in the ways outlined in the next section.

From a macro-socioeconomic perspective, the crisis in rural Mexico can be seen in the following trends: first, a persistently high incidence of income poverty, affecting over sixty percent of the rural population.[3] Second, stagnating productivity: between 1980 and 2006 agricultural production in Mexico dropped by 6.9 per cent in per capita terms (González and Macías, 2007). Third, the country's agricultural trade deficit has increased exponentially since the beginning of NAFTA, from 761 million dollars in 1994 to 6 billion dollars in 2008. Fourth, rural labour markets have contracted: between 1995 and 2008, almost 2 million agricultural jobs were lost and this was only partially compensated for by the creation of 854 thousand non-agricultural jobs in the rural sector (INEGI, 2008a). Furthermore, the real value of agricultural wages dropped by 10 per cent between 1993 and 2004 (CEPAL, 2005). It also

[2] Guzmán (2008) estimates that, in 2008, Cargill's profits increased by 81.4 per cent, Archer Daniels Midland by 85.5 percent and Bunge's by an incredible 1,451.9 per cent.

[3] There is much debate regarding poverty trends during the neoliberal era. Official statistics indicate that the incidence of poverty (on the national level and also within the rural sector) declined steadily from 1996 to 2006, then increased abruptly in 2008, as food prices began to rise sharply. Independent researchers, however, have been sceptical of the sustained and significant decline between 2000 and 2006, in the context of slow economic growth. With this in mind, Julio Boltvinik – perhaps Mexico's most renowned poverty expert – attributes at least part of the apparent drop to an illusion created by major changes made to the questionnaire and to the sampling method used to gather data, resulting in the registration of more income (Boltvinik, 2006).

bears mentioning that labour conditions in the agricultural sector tend to be deplorable, characterized by cramped living conditions, frequent exposure to dangerous agrochemicals and lack of social security, among other hardships.

Limited job opportunities and poor market conditions for small-scale farming have spurred on emigration from the countryside. To be sure, Mexico's rural population had been decreasing in relative terms since 1940, when the country adopted input substituting industrialization policies that favoured the urban industrial sector. But it was not until the turn of the century that the rural population began to decrease in absolute terms. In this way, between 2000 and 2005, rural Mexico (defined as the sum of the communities with less than 2 500 inhabitants) shrank by a half million people (INEGI, 2008b).

With regards to the environmental dimensions of the crisis, it has become clear that the dominate mode of agricultural production, characterized by the use of Green Revolution technologies, has given rise to a number of rural environmental problems, many of which – even by the governments own conservative estimates – have reached gigantic proportions. For example, in a recent report published by the *Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources – Semarnat, 2006), the current rate of deforestation is estimated to be between 316 and 800 thousand hectares per year, soil erosion has affected 43 per cent of the country's territory, almost 2 600 species of plants and animals in Mexico are threatened by extinction, and 104 water aquifers suffer symptoms of overexploitation. Of course, the causes of these problems are manifold and complex. Nevertheless, it seems that the government's efforts to address them are woefully inadequate. This is reflected in Semarnat's budget, equal to just 2.06 per cent of the discretionary federal budget and a mere 0.32 per cent of the country's GDP (Tetreault *et al.*, 2010).

From a gender perspective, the crisis has been superimposed on lingering inequalities between men and women in the countryside. For example, only 17.5 per cent of Mexico's *ejidatarios* are women, with access to land and community voting rights; rural women continue to have higher illiteracy rates than their male counterparts (21.7 per cent compared to 16 per cent) and slightly less formal schooling (5.3 years on average compared to 5.6 for men) (INEGI, 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that, with increased migration, women often get left behind with increased workloads (see for example, Espinosa, 1998). Furthermore, their work largely goes unnoticed in the national accounts. Official statistics show that only 12 per cent of the Economically Active Population (EAP) in the agricultural sector is female, while unofficial surveys

indicate that 85 per cent of rural women engage in agricultural work, most of it non-remunerated.

The cultural dimension of the crisis is manifest in ethnic inequality, palpable in the following statistics: 80 per cent of economically active indigenous adults have incomes below the official poverty line (designated "patrimony poverty"), and this rate is three times higher than the national average; 40 per cent of indigenous adults have not finished elementary school and child mortality rates in indigenous communities are 50 per cent higher than the national average (INEGI, 2008b). Beyond these statistics are deeply embedded racist attitudes, evident in various forms of mass media, as well as in everyday discourse.

Related to these racial inequalities are the political tensions that exist between the government and independently organized indigenous groups, most importantly the Zapatistas. These are described briefly below. Other sources of political tension in the countryside include: the growing strength of Mexico's drug cartels, who appear to enjoy widespread support in rural communities; massive demonstrations staged by independent peasant organizations in recent years; and hotly contested federal elections in 1988 and 2006, both of which were stained by accusations of fraud.

In broad outline, these are the dimensions to Mexico's rural crisis. Let us now turn to the ways in which peasant and indigenous groups have adapted and resisted.

Adaptation and resistance

Not surprisingly, responses to the crisis have been diverse. I have identified seven major strategies pursued by Mexican peasants and indigenous groups in their effort to improve their living conditions under current structural conditions. These are: conventional farming, organic farming and fair trade, abandoning and renting of land, labour migration, protest and demand, autonomous development projects and the cultivation of illicit crops. Before analyzing these strategies, it is important to point out that some of them are highly interrelated in the sense that they are often pursued simultaneously within the same family, rural community or region.

Conventional Farming

In spite of adverse market conditions, millions of Mexican farmers – including small-scale and indigenous farmers – continue to produce corn and other

traditional crops with GreenRevolution technology (*i.e.* chemical fertilizers, herbicides, high-yielding seeds, and so on). At least until the onset of the current food and financial crises, there were approximately 3 million conventional producers of corn in Mexico (Rello and Saavedra, 2007).So why do Mexican farmers continue to produce crops using conventional or Green Revolution technology? There is no room to explore this question here, but I will propose four hypotheses: first, there is deeply embedded cultural symbolism associated with the planting of corn, especially for indigenous farmers; second there are low risks associated with conventional farming; third, there are difficulties associated with switching to high-value export crops such as fruits and vegetables (for example: lack of credit, extension services and marketing support); and finally, there are barriers and cons to organic farming, most importantly, it invariably implies increased physical labour, especially to weed manually and apply organic fertilizers. Also, most conventional farmers do not had access to extension services to learn about modern organic farming techniques, at least not in the state of Jalisco, where I carry out most of my field research.

Organic Farming

These barriers notwithstanding, there are many benefits to organic farming: input costs are reduced, farmers and consumers are not exposed to agrochemicals, soil and other natural resources are better conserved, and organic products can fetch higher prices, especially in niche international markets. For these reasons, between 1996 and 2005, the area cultivated with certified organic crops in Mexico increased by a factor of 13, from 23 thousand hectares to almost 300 thousand (Gómez *et al.*, 2008). Part of this expansion has to do with the fact that large- and medium-scale producers have been getting on to the organic-farming bandwagon. Still, more than 95 per cent of Mexico's 80 000 certified organic farmers are small in scale, with an average of two hectares of land. These farmers are organized into producer cooperatives that generate about 70 per cent of the $250 million earned from organic exports in 2005 (*Ibid*). Almost half of this production is accounted for by coffee. Mexico is the number one producer of certified organic coffee in the world.

The organic-coffee movement is an alternative that has come from below, with virtually no support from the Mexican government. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been key players in conducting agroecological research, providing technical assistance and constructing fair-trade networks. Financial support has come primarily from international institutions. And, of

course, most of the credit must be given to the peasants themselves for their productive and organizational capacity. Although this movement has been extremely successful, it needs to be kept in perspective: Mexico's organic exports only represented 2.1 per cent of Mexico's food exports in 2005.

Abandoning and Renting of land

Between 1995 and 2005, the area seeded with basic grains in Mexico diminished by 16 per cent, from 12 492 hectares to 10 443 hectares (Sagarpa, 2008). This trend seems to be continuing in the context of the food and financial crises. In some communities, it is the most marginal land that is being abandoned, with the unintended and positive consequence of alleviating environmental pressure (Tetreault, 2009).

Renting of land seems to be another major response to the crisis. Although there are no reliable statistics to corroborate this on the national level, my own field research points in this direction. In La Ciénega, for example, an *ejido* located in the productive agricultural valleys surrounding Autlán, Jalisco, exactly half of the land is rented to agave producing companies. These companies tend to apply excessive amounts of agrochemicals in order to get the most out of the land in the relatively short period of time that they have it rented, leading to a host of environmental problems, including soil erosion, soil exhaustion and disappearance of endemic species. Of course, by either abandoning or renting their land, farmers are free to search for alternative employment, often leading to labour migration.

Cultivation of Illicit Crops

The United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that 300 thousand Mexican farmers cultivate illicit crops. This translates into approximately one in every 13 farmers. According to the same source, these farmers produced about 18 tonnes of heroine and 16 thousand tonnes of marijuana in 2007, generating between 13 and 15 billion dollars of revenue.

In practice, those who cultivate illicit crops enjoy a high degree of impunity. This is the case in Sierra de Manantlán in western Jalisco, where most governmental agencies turn a blind eye to marijuana production. It is also reflected in the astonishing number of high-profile members of drug cartels who benefit from the government's main agricultural subsidy program, Procampo: in a special edition of the magazine *Proceso*, Espinosa (2009) mentions 25 names.

As Victoria Malkin (2001) discovered in her field research in Michoacan, there much ambivalence towards the drug trade in many rural communities. On the one hand, it is associated with migration, modernity and philanthropy; on the other, with illegality, militarization and violence. One thing is for sure: the production and distribution of illicit crops tends to infuse large amounts of money into rural communities. It also affects power relations, favouring some social groups over others and shaping electoral politics. In fact, it has become increasingly evident that drug traffickers have infiltrated all levels of government in Mexico.

Labour Migration[4]

International migration has burgeoned during the neoliberal era. In 1990, there were 4 million 447 thousand Mexicans in the US; by 2007, this number had grown by a factor of 2.7, to 11 million 812 thousand (Conapo, 2008). Approximately 40 percent of Mexican immigrants in the US come from rural areas, even though rural Mexico only accounts for 23.5 per cent of the country's total population. In net terms, this translates into more than 200 thousand people that leave rural Mexico and make it to the US each year.[5]

Remittances have grown even faster. Between 1991 and 2008, money sent back from the US grew from $2.66 billion to over $25 billion, that is, by a factor of almost ten.[6] As Fernando Cortés and his collaborators demonstrate (2007), until recently this has been the main factor in preventing the countryside from falling deeper into income poverty. However, in the context of the current financial crisis, remittances have shrunk by about 12 per cent, according to Mexico's Central Bank.

[4] Labour migration is a complex phenomenon in rural Mexico. It can be seasonal, intermittent, permanent or semi-permanent; it can be to commercial farms, regional urban centres, large cities or across the border to the US. Sometimes only male family members migrate in search of employment, but often women do too. Mexican peasants and indigenous people find jobs in many sectors of the economy, including agriculture, construction, domestic help, gardening, etcétera. One common denominator is that these jobs tend to be categorized as "unskilled labour". It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these nuances. Instead, I point towards some of the major ways in which rural labour migration has evolved during the neoliberal era.

[5] These numbers appear to have dropped off sharply in the context of the current financial crisis.

[6] As Durand (2007) observes, part of this dramatic increase is due to better accounting methods used by the Bank of Mexico. Other factors include: 1) an increase in the number of illegal migrants (who tend to send back more money than legal migrants); and 2) a moderate decrease in the transaction costs of sending money back from the United States, due to increased competition and denouncements against Money Gram and Western Union, which used to control the market and charge exorbitant fees.

With regards to rural-urban migration, although internal migration patterns have become more complex in Mexico during the past few decades, this continues to be an important trend. Between 1995 and 2000, approximately 864 thousand peasants migrated to urban centres (CONAPO, 2008). As David Barkin (2001) observes, migration to the city does not always imply an abandonment of the countryside; it is often part of a multifaceted family strategy for generating the much-needed monetary income required to maintain roots in rural communities of origin.

Of course, migration – whether it is to urban centres within the country or across the border to the US – has its pros and cons. While it tends to be a source of increased monetary income, it is not necessarily a pathway out of poverty *per se*, given the hardships and risks associated with it. For example, rural-urban migration usually implies living in slums, where environmental problems, crime, violence and vice are commonplace. Furthermore, most peasants who migrate to the city end up working in the informal sector where remuneration is very low.

International migration can pay off big once a migrant gets settled into a regular paying job. However, set up costs can be very high, crossing the border illegally has become progressively more expensive and dangerous, families are often separated for long periods of time, women are often left behind with heavier workloads, and Mexicans who reside in the US tend to make up part of the most marginalized segments of American society.

With all this in mind, migration is sometimes contrasted with actions of protest and demand in an unfavourable light. The former is seen as an individualistic form of renunciation and adaptation to difficult structural conditions, while the later is viewed as a collective form of resistance. From this perspective, migration tends to undermine actions of protest and demand by draining communities of many of their dynamic leaders. While there may be much truth to this, recent investigations by Jonathan Fox (2007) demonstrate that international migration can also be associated with new forms of political and social activism. Also, as alluded to above, from the perspective of "new rurarilty", labour migration often forms part of a multifaceted survival strategy for peasants and indigenous families that maintain strong links to their land. In these ways, migration can be seen as a form of "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985), whereby poor farmers adapt to the structural conditions that make it difficult if not impossible to survive on agricultural activities alone, while resisting the pressure to completely abandon their land, family, community and identity.

Social Movements of Protest and Demand

During the neoliberal era, three major and overlapping currents of protest and demand stand out: the Zapatista movement, the small-scale commercial farmers' movement, and the environmental movement to protect natural resources from the depredations of large-scale capitalist development. In addition, the century-old land movement is still alive, but with the exception of the Zapatista land grabs in Chiapas in the mid-1990s, land invasions have subsided significantly since the mid-1970s.

The protest-and-demand element of the Zapatista movement was most salient during the negotiations of the San Andres Accords (from 1994 to 1996), and then again during the first months of 2001, when newly elected president Vicente Fox was put to the test after having declared during his campaign that he could solve the political conflict in Chiapas in just 15 minutes. During these periods, the Zapatistas organized events such as marches, national and international conferences, consultations, workshops and so on, not just to gain public support for their cause, but also and more importantly to create a space for indigenous people from across the country to discuss common problems and formulate collective demands and proposals. These efforts culminated, first, in the signing of the San Andres Accords in February of 1996, which were immediately shelved by the Zedillo government and, second, in 2001, when the Zapatistas marched to Mexico City and entered into the Chamber of Congress to insist on maintaining the essence of these Accords in the so-called "ley Cocopa".[7] In spite of these efforts, Congress voted to approve a watered-down version of this proposal: *Reforma Constitucional en Materia de Derechos y Cultura Indígena* (Constitutional Reform on Matters of Indigenous Rights and Culture). In response, the Zapatistas cut off negotiations and turned inwards towards their base communities to promote autonomous development, prompting indigenous communities in other parts of the country to do the same.

While the Zapatista strategy of autonomous development implies a certain degree of disengagement with the world capitalist system, the small-scale commercial farmers' movement, concentrated to a certain extent in the north-western parts of the country, has sought to reinsert small-scale producers into the global economy under more favourable conditions (Bartra, 2005). This is the second main social movement of protest and demand that has evolved in the Mexican countryside during the neoliberal era. Its roots can be found in the 1970s when peasants began to demand greater land redis-

[7] Cocopa: la Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación.

tribution, more participatory democracy, and better marketing conditions. It went into a lull during the 1980s as the country suffered the worst part of the debt crisis, and it re-emerged in the early 1990s, when small-scale farmers began to feel the pinch from deteriorating terms of trade, indebtedness, high interest rates and lack of access to institutional credit. At this point, organized farmers blocked highways and filled plazas with their tractors in an effort to persuade the government to adopt pro-peasant policies. Some modest concessions were made by the Zedillo government, enough to calm protests until the end of its term. However, the protests resumed in the first years of Vicente Fox's term, as small- and medium-sized farmers began to rally around the slogan "el campo no aguanta más" (the countryside cannot take anymore).

This movement reached a crescendo in late 2002 and early 2003, as peasants organized demonstrations throughout the country, including a protest march in Mexico City that drew over 100,000 supporters, forcing the government to the negotiating table. The main result of all this was the *Acuerdo Nacional para el Campo* (National Accord for the Countryside – ANC), signed on the 28th of April, 2003, by the Fox administration and by eight of the 12 peasant organizations originally involved in the movement.[8] As several researchers have documented in detail (for example: Quintana, 2004; and Rubio, 2004), since then, the government has only partially and superficially fulfilled its side of the bargain. Increased spending has been characterized by foot dragging, clientelism and a preference for social assistance programs over long-term productive investments. Moreover, the participation of independent peasant organizations in the decision making process has been hindered by excessive bureaucracy.

In light of all this, some of the same independent peasant organizations re-emerged in late 2007 to undertake a new round of protests, this time under the banner *Sin maíz no hay país* (without maize there is no country). On the international level, this movement is connected to *Vía Campesina*, which has orchestrated protests around the world, including in Cancun during the WTO meeting held in September of 2003 and, seven years later in the same

[8] The four organizations that did not sign the ANC are: Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas (UNORCA), Frente Democrático Campesino de Chihuahua (DFCChih), Unión Nacional de Organizaciones en Forestería Comunitaria (Unofoc) and Frente Nacional en Defensa del Campo Mexicano (FNDCM). The eight that signed are: Asociación Mexicana de Uniones de Crédito del Sector Social (AMUCSS), Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo (ANEC), Coordinadora Estatal de Productores Cafetaleros de Oaxaca (CEPCO), Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos, A.C (CIOAC), Coalición de Organizaciones Democráticas Urbanas y Campesinas, A.C (CODUC), Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Cafetaleras (CNOC), Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala (CNPA), Red Mexicana de Organizaciones Campesinas Forestales (Red Mocaf).

tourist destination, during the 16th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.[9]

On the national level, the demands of *Sin maíz no hay país* can be summarized as follows:

a. The renegotiation of NAFTA's agricultural chapter;
b. Genuine participation of independent peasant organizations in policy-making processes;
c. Significantly higher public spending in the rural sector, in order to increase agricultural production, improve rural diets, create non-agricultural jobs, and provide farmers with subsidized credit, technical training and extension services;
d. The application of the precautionary principal with regards to genetically modified organisms,
e. Land reform and the reconstitution of inalienable *ejidal* rights; and
f. The honouring of the San Andres Accords (CNDSARC, 2008).

It bears mentioning that, behind these demands there is a vision that small- and medium-scale farming can and should form the basis of an integrated agricultural development strategy geared towards achieving Food Sovereignty.[10] This vision implies that the government play a facilitating role, at least in reorienting rural policy and channelling resources to peasant groups. As such, it assumes that past problems of clientelism and corruption can be overcome by allowing independent peasant organizations to participate more in the decision making process and in their role as watchdog. Whether or not this is possible has yet to be seen. So far, the Calderon administration has shown no intention of meeting the movement's demands. Instead, its main reaction to the global food crisis has been twofold: to further liberalize agricultural trade by lifting all tariffs and quotas on agricultural imports, regardless of their country of origin; and to increase the food subsidy component of *Oportunidades*, the country's main anti-poverty program.

[9] The demands of Vía Campesina include: (a) an immediate moratorium on further WTO negotiations; (b) take agriculture out of bilateral and regional trade agreements and the WTO; (c) create genuine international democratic mechanisms to regulate food trade while respecting food sovereignty in each country; (d) secure food sovereignty by respecting each country's right to define its own agricultural policies, including the right to prohibit imports; and (e) prohibit biopiracy and patents on life (Desmarais, 2007: 108).

[10] The Vía Campesina defines food sovereignty as "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity", "the right to produce our own food in our own territory", and "the right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy" (Vía Campesina, cited in Desmarias, 2007: 34).

Turning now to the third main current of protest and demand in rural Mexico, there has been a growing numbers of mobilizations to defend natural resources from being destroyed by large-scale private and state-owned enterprises. Like the other two major protest-and-demand movements during the neoliberal era, this one has its roots in the 1970s. For example, in 1976, twenty three communities in the state of Tabasco signed *El Pacto Ribereño de Tabasco* (the Riparian Pact) and began blocking access to oil wells in order to demand compensation from the state-owned petroleum company *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex), for its contamination of 40,000 hectares of land. In another example, in 1979, the indigenous community of Santa Fe de la Laguna, Michoacán, formed *la Organización Ribereña contra la Contaminación del lago de Pátzcuaro* (the Riparian Organization against Contamination of Lake Pátzcuaro – ORCA) in order to prevent the construction of a research station for nuclear energy. In one more example, in the early 1980s, twenty-two indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca formed *la Organización para la Defensa de los Recursos Naturales de la Sierra de Juárez* (the Organization in Defense of the Natural Resources and Social Development of the Sierra Juarez – Odrenasij) and began blocking roads and staging protests in order to stop large logging companies from destroying their forests.[11] These types of actions have proliferated during the 1980s and early 1990s. By 1991 there were about 30 peasant organizations from across the country (most of them indigenous) that were engaged in some sort of environmental activism (Toledo, 1992). Since then, environmental activism in the countryside has continued to grow, involving hundreds of communities and a myriad of conflicts (Toledo, 2000). Presently, organized peasants are carrying out actions of protest and demand around issues such as: industrial waste, the construction of new dams, the contamination of rivers and lakes, mining, urban sprawl, environmentally destructive tourist developments, and the erosion of genetic biodiversity. Until recently, these types of conflicts have been largely isolated and dispersed, constituting an amorphous rural environmental movement without any overarching organization on the national level.[12] However, during the first decade of the 21st century, several national-level umbrella organizations have emerged, most importantly: *la Red en Defensa del Maíz Nativo* (the Network for the Defense of Native Corn), which was created in January

[11] For a detailed description of these rural ecological movements, see Flores *et al* (1988) and Bray (1991).

[12] Even though, until recently, there has been no independent national-level environmental organization to represent articulate the rural ecological conflicts, regional- and national-level peasant organizations have included an environmental dimension in their discourse since the 1970s.

of 2001, three months after the discovering of transgenic corn in Oaxaca; *el Movimiento Mexicano de Afectados por las Presas y en Defensa de los Ríos* (the Mexican Movement of Those Affected by Dams and in Defense of Rivers – Mapder), formed in October of 2004; *la Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería* (the Mexican Network of Those Affected by Mining – REMA), conceived during Mapder's fifth meeting, in June, 2008, with the participation of representatives from 62 local and regional organizations; *and la Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales* (the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected), established in August of 2008, by 80 non-governmental organizations, in order share experiences and articulate collective environmental demands on the national scale.

Autonomous Development[13]

Autonomous development is geared towards increasing self-reliance on the family, community and regional level. It comes from below. In other words, it is carried out by community-based organizations that usually receive assistance from NGOs, universities, religious groups and/or other segments of civil society, and sometimes from progressive state agencies too.[14]

In rural Mexico, there have been three major currents of autonomous development during the neoliberal era, namely: agroecology, the cooperative movement, and the Zapatista movement. As with the protest-and-demand movements, all three of these have antecedents. During the 1970s, social activists often gained entrance into marginalized rural communities by helping organize small-scale community development projects. Some of these projects were geared towards improving local diets. Existing agricultural practices were used as a point of departure. The idea was to conserve the positive elements of indigenous modes of agricultural production (particularly with regards to ecological sustainability) and at the same time, make improvements by applying modern science. In this way, Mexican NGOs such as *el Centro de Ecodesarrollo* (the Center for Eco-development), *el Grupo de Estudios ambientales* (the Group of Environmental Studies – GEA), and *Estudios Rurales y Asesoría Campesina* (Rural Studies and Peasant Assistance) began

[13] Here, "autonomous development" is understood to be synonymous with "autochthonous", "grassroots" and "community-based" development.

[14] In many ways, autonomous development projects and actions of protest and demand are two sides of the same coin (Bartra, 2005). They are frequently pursued by the same collective actors, either simultaneously or sequentially. Moreover, they often mutually reinforce each other through a process dubbed "the conservation and mutation of social energy" (Hirschman, 1984).

promoting agroecology, especially in the southern parts of the country where the indigenous population is concentrated (Carruthers, 1996).

Initial efforts were geared towards producing more and better food for auto-consumption, but by the late 1980s, peasants and their assistants began to discover that agroecological techniques could be used to produce organic coffee for niche markets, thereby providing much needed monetary income (Roozen and VanderHoff, 2002). In this way, the agroecology movement gave birth to the organic farming and fair-trade movements.

In the north-western part of the country, the cooperative movement emerged in a somewhat different form as collectively organized commercial farmers sought to "appropriate the productive process" by creating independent credit unions, extension services and marketing cooperatives. One of the most important pioneering efforts along these lines was the creation of *la Coalición de Ejidos Colectivos de los Valles del Yaqui y del Mayo* (Coalition of Collective Ejidos from the Yaqui and Mayo Valleys – CECVYM). Originally comprised of 76 *ejidos*, this coalition was formed in 1976 in the state of Sonora, with multiple departments to attend to the diverse social and productive needs of its members. The cooperative movement flowered in the early 1990s, with the formation of several national-level organizations, for example: CNOC, AMUCSSS, Red Mocaf, ANEC.[15] It is still alive today, however it struggles under the current policy framework.

Finally, the Zapatista movement for autonomous development: this is perhaps the most ambitious of all, resulting in the reorganization of half the map of Chiapas into five autonomous municipalities called *Caracoles*. These municipalities are administered by Good-Government Committees, comprised of community members who rotate frequently and do not receive pay. Serving on a Committee is generally considered to be an honour and a duty. At the same time, it requires dedicating time serving the community that could otherwise be used for productive activities. Since their creation in 2003, the *Caracoles* have established themselves as legitimate political entities, obliging government agencies to negotiate with them on any matter that affects Zapatista territory (Mora, 2007). What is more, autonomous indigenous municipalities are not limited to the state of Chiapas; indigenous groups in Michoacán, Oaxaca, Veracruz and elsewhere have created autonomous municipalities in the image of *Caracoles*.

From a different angle, the Zapatista are also organized into a host of cooperatives to produce organic coffee, artisan crafts, and other goods for the regional, national and even international markets. While these projects pro-

[15] These acronyms are spelt out in footnote number 8.

vide a source of monetary income, the bulk of their productive activities are geared towards subsistence and self-sufficiency. With this focus, agroecology is commonly practiced throughout Zapatista territory (*Ibid*). At the same time, there have been some conflicts with other sectors of the cooperative movement, particularly land disputes with non-Zapatista organizations such as *la Organización Regional de Cafeticultores de Ocosingo* (the Regional Coffee Producers of Ocosingo – ORCAO), which forms part of the *la Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas* (National Union of Regional Autonomous Peasant Organizations – UNORCA).[16]

Conclusions

Although the roots to the crisis in rural Mexico can be traced back to before the neoliberal era, it was not until structural adjustments were carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s that it began to unfurl in the ways described in this article. Over the past twenty years, small-scale farmers have been faced with deteriorating terms of trade. Agricultural production has stalled in per capita terms, the trade deficit has skyrocketed, the incidence of income poverty has remained alarmingly high, women have been burdened with heavier workloads, and the environment has deteriorated perceptibly. Faced with this situation, peasants and indigenous groups have pursued diverse strategies of adaptation and resistance. These include: conventional farming, organic farming and fair trade, abandoning and renting of land, the cultivation of illicit crops, labour migration, protest and demand, and autonomous development. As mentioned, some of these strategies are complementary.

In connection with the protest-and-demand movements, organized peasants have proposed an alternative set of rural policies oriented towards improving living standards in marginalized rural communities and achieving food sovereignty on the national level. These alternatives include: the removal of agriculture from international trade agreements (including the WTO), the adoption of protectionist measures against the dumping of cheap grains and against the need to import expensive basic staples, the reorientation of existing agricultural subsidy programs in order to channel the majority of their benefits towards small-scale farmers, a substantial increase

[16] UNORCA is one of the most important independent peasant organizations in Mexico, with a decentralized presence throughout the country, national-level representation and a focus on "appropriating the productive process". It forms part of *Vía Campesina*. As Alberto Gómez Flores (ex-President and representative of UNORCA) explained to me in an interview carried out in early March, 2010, Orcao is a renegade member of UNORCA, which cannot be easily expelled because of the decentralized nature of said national-level umbrella organization.

in public spending in the rural sector, the reconstitution of inalienable *ejidal* rights, government support for organic agriculture, and the recognition of indigenous groups' right to autonomy and self-determination. Whether or not this strategy can achieve its twin goals has yet to be seen. The autonomous development projects presented in this paper provide reasons for hope. However, in order to adopt the pro-peasant policy alternatives required to nurture these projects on the national level, a left-wing political coalition would need to take control of the state apparatus. And, in order to avoid past problems of paternalism, clientelism and corruption, this coalition would have to be kept in check by a strong civil society.

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