

# Autonomy is more than direct democracy Indigenous farming and food are core values

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Promotoras Zapatistas teach agroecology. School for Chiapas

After ten years of Zapatista autonomy it is worth pondering, albeit briefly, the organizational form of self-government with particular emphasis on projects in education, health, and agroecology and to highlight the role that women play in these processes.

To understand the concept of autonomy we have to start from two premises: 1) subjects have self-determination, i.e. the ability to make decisions in regard to the forms of organization, and 2) territory, is an area where they carry out decision-making, implement actions, manage resources, and create identities.

So, with the inspiration of autonomy in Zapatista territory, Indigenous peoples have in practice been *reinventing the meaning of democracy*, working through their own contradictions. According to Ramirez Zaragoza (2008:82):

...Not only from the 1994 uprising, but above all, since the shaping of the San Andres Accords that were breached by the government in 1996 and after the adoption of the law on

Indigenous rights and culture of 2001, Indigenous communities were in real terms legally denied the possibility of self-determination based on their customs.

It is also important to point out that the shift to the demand for autonomy has to do with territorial considerations, which carry an implicit idea of sustainability linked to the style of pre-Hispanic social-territorial organization, which also corresponds to a modern anti-capitalist vision of the world. “The territory has to do with where the culture is based, as cultural territory, as the product of a constant change in social process, and this is not only geographical-political.” (Ceceña 2004:602)

It is the territory controlled by the Zapatistas where we find the construction of the five Aguascalientes<sup>[i]</sup> as results of identity networks that link across the territory in rebellion in Chiapas, where the Zapatista Indigenous people construct the possibility of improving their living conditions.



Image courtesy of [Dorset Chiapas Solidarity](#)

At first people called “civil society” promoted and supported productive education and health projects in various Autonomous Municipalities of Chiapas. For example, in *Oventic Caracol II*, the education and health needs of more than 38 surrounding communities are served through the clinic – Hospital “La Guadalupe” and High School – and these were the first projects to be generated in Zapatista territory. (Sub Comandante Marcos, 2001: 249)

The Zapatista support bases within the Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities [MAREZ] are clear instances of rebel government and play the most important role in the Zapatista struggle through this [spatial agency that Indigenous people use] to hold their autonomy, *always without recognition the Mexican government.*

Through their own means of incorporating *productive* projects, the Zapatista communities build their bases of support through other forms of politics where leading-by-obeying [*mandar obedeciendo*] practice emerges out of a process in which the [new political subjects] radically distance themselves from institutional organizations:

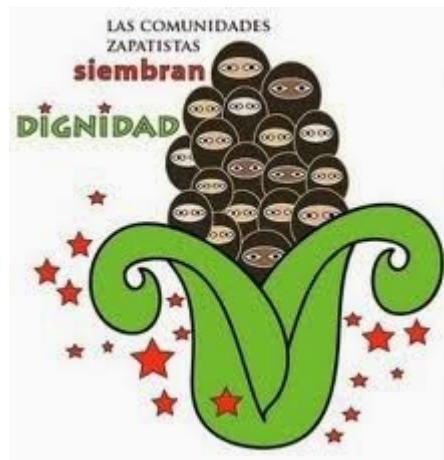
*The JBG ( ... ) of these 5 snails held for other revocation of mandate, for those who do not meet either their names are removed by the communities, and the charge is rotating and has no compensation, as it is conceived as a job and collective benefit ( ... ) This body (JBG ) are ( ... ) a class instance where its member are rotated weekly ( ... ) remain from Sunday to Sunday and then return to their communities in origin municipalities and authorities, and again ( ... ) after three or four weeks. This representation mechanism originates from the different communities of the municipality named the Autonomous Council of the municipality and its various representatives in municipal commissions. In turn, members of the Council of each municipality are organized in shifts so as to ensure their continued involvement. (Cerda Garcia, 2011: 147)*

Renewal of town council terms every three years by [consensus of] general assembly. During the six months following the end of a term, the former autonomous authorities have the responsibility to advise and assist the new authorities. Thus, the JBG is comprised of about 12 people – both women and men – and belonging to different municipalities of Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabales, and mestiza/o communities. The daily work is organized through projects [under supervision] of autonomous commissions for finance, complaints [accountability and transparency], issues [dispute resolution], responses to requests, among others. (Op. cit , 2011: 148)

Councils act as autonomous bodies representing the municipalities [and] ... Good Government are bodies representing various Autonomous Municipalities and become the representative voice of all members of the communities belonging to an ethnic group, in the same way that JBG representatives were representatives of all municipalities falling within their jurisdiction regardless of which particular municipality the representative belongs to (Ramirez Zaragoza, 2009: 37-39).

Regarding the Zapatista organization, members of the Board of Good Government at Oventic Caracol, who were active during the brigade that participated in Mana Radio in solidarity with Zapatista communities in 2011, talked about the meaning of work as part of an autonomous body:

*...We are giving service to our people, we know what we have said from the 94, ( ... ) we do have to change a situation that is of the people ( ... ) we see what needs there are here ( ... ) is our obligation to receive national and international visitors and it is our obligation to see the fulfillment of the needs of every people of every village. (Good Government Oventic, 2011, interview)*



The difference between public schools and Zapatista charter schools is the [method of] imparting of knowledge and the content. On the one hand, in the public schools classes are taught only in Spanish and Indigenous culture is left aside, while Zapatista schools the identity of Indigenous peoples is encouraged and classes are given in Spanish, Zoque, Tzeltal and Chol and [the curriculum] speaks of the Zapatista struggle and history. The stories of the autonomous learning of children are about their own people and struggles. The challenge in education is now to correlate all projects. Classes in health and agroecology are wanted by and offered in the communities. (Muñoz Ramírez, 2004: Internet) The autonomous educational projects are very important in the Indigenous movement in Chiapas because it is the means by which they reproduce their social practices, i.e. raising awareness among Zapatista children and generating the means of reproduction and continuity of their struggle [for autonomy].

Regarding autonomous healthcare, the Zapatista project [in Oventic] has built their own clinics and organized themselves as health workers campaigning for hygiene and disease prevention. Likewise, they have conducted “rescue projects” for traditional medicine and participated in the construction of dental clinics.

*We have a central clinic ( ... ) the same in each Autonomous Municipalities ( ... ) Why ? Because municipalities are very withdrawn ( ... ) but not only , we also have nursing homes in each community ( ... ) us as Zapatistas, the people themselves began to organize ( ... ) are not getting money, pay ( ... ) we are in resistance.* (Good Government Oventic, 2011, interview)

Autonomous regions are [working to extend a network] of nursing homes and clinics, dental offices, clinical and herbology [ethnobotany] laboratories, and centers for practiced ophthalmology and gynecology as well as pharmacies. In the community health system of the Zapatistas, the queries have a nominal fee and are sometimes free and serve anyone who requests [medical attention] whether or not the [person is part of the] EZLN support base. Traditional medicine is free while [provision of] pharmaceutical medicine [is provided at] cost. (Zibechi , 2008: 43 )

Despite the lack of recognition by the Mexican government, the strategies in the field of health the Zapatista Support Bases are implementing illustrate efficiency [as measured by] (reduction of infant and maternal mortality) but also because it makes possible the formation of a *local health strategy controlled by the Indigenous population.*



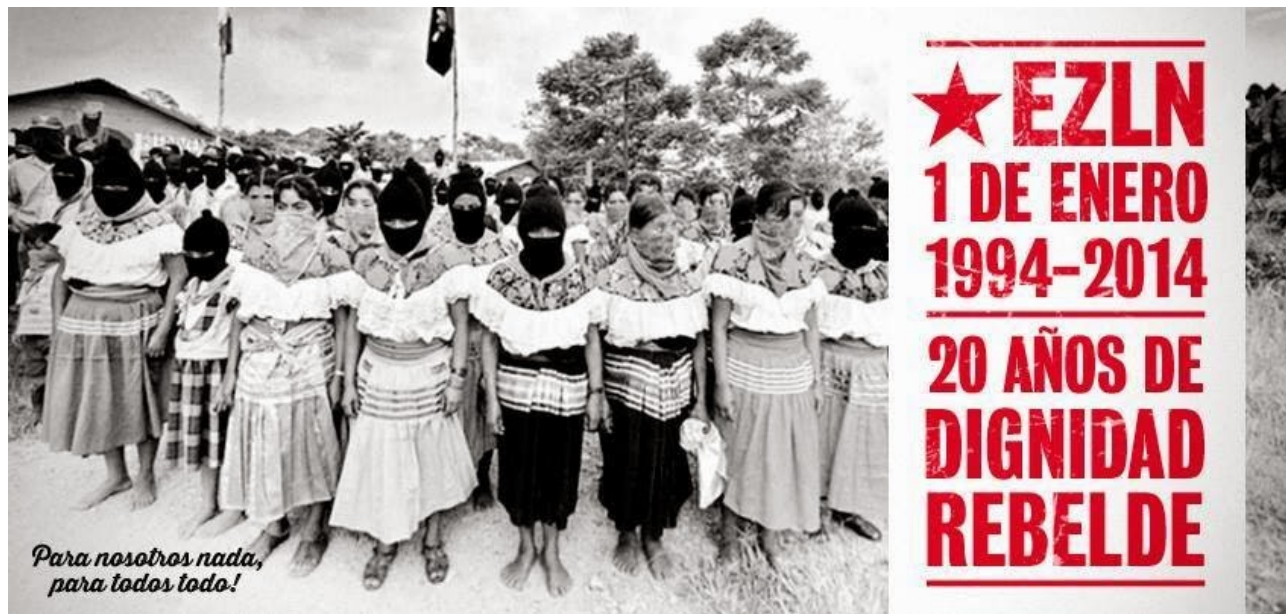
Zapatista communities are trying to ensure food sovereignty and practices that respect “Mother Earth” through agroecology projects. These include advocates working with communities and municipalities with Zapatista support bases.

One project focuses on a soil improvement plan consisting, among other things, of efforts to eliminate the practice of gradually burning *acahuales* [the native tree plantings that are designed to rotate fallow fields back into wild forest species for a long duration recovery period after intensive human uses]; the use organic fertilizers and the end of insecticides for pests; all this in order to restore fertility to the lands. (Muñoz Ramírez, 2004: Internet)

In this respect the members of the Good Government

*...realized that the chemicals sold by the rich and poor governance are just killing Mother Earth, polluting the soil, the river, the air ( ... ) the earth and us, for the chemicals ( ... ) they bring a lot disease ( ... ) right now there are already many communities, many municipalities everywhere, that know how organic fertilizers are prepared ( ... ) and are not using chemicals and are learning to do naturally pure production very well, right now they are learning about soil conservation ( ... ) people are already planting cornfields, beans, vegetables ( ... ) Nature ( ... ) already shows us a good way of how to survive (Good Government Junta, Oventic, 2011, interview)*

The Zapatista agroecology projects – given the form of understanding of nature as toward a balanced use of natural resources and always with respect for the environment of Indigenous peoples – makes preservation of the local ecology possible along with the development of broad knowledge of the nutritional, therapeutic, and life [biodiversity] facilitating properties [of agroecosystems and their local contexts.]



Another key feature is that the Zapatista movement has generated a number of changes in the forms of the daily relationship established between men and women. In this sense, it has enabled the participation of women from the early days of public activity during the EZLN uprising in 1994 and before women had rights to participate in the work of the people. Thus, a great achievement of the organization itself has to do with the dignity of women as has been done in the fight against the practice of “selling” women, and in which women previously could not freely choose their own marital or domestic partners. (Cerdeja Garcia, 2011:114)

In the spaces of the Autonomous Municipalities or Snails people can exercise freely the experiences of courtship, pair formation, and the exercise of sexuality. There is also an intention and a series of measures to ensure that during meetings and workshops the tasks traditionally reserved for women such as grooming or food preparation are also shared by men. ( op. cit , 2011 . 114 )

*Not only men, women also are doing their job , are coordinators , coordinate together men and women ( ... ) when it comes to marketing cooperatives as they are , these are the same women who carry out all the jobs done there . Currently in the Chiapas Highlands are two cooperatives that are working and the collective group of women, they are the policy tables ( ... ) there are the same companions who make the decision , taking initiative , problem solve when problems arise on their cooperative ( ... ) because all that is needed there. (Women of the Good Government Oventic, 2011, interview)*

These cooperatives, shops, farms and collective ovens are also used for discussion and collective deliberation, as spaces of self-management and discussion of gender identities, and enable mixed participation and the participation of women in political discussion.

An important feature that emerges from Zapatismo and that I cannot pass-up without noting is their concept of power because they do not recognize protagonists or embrace the idea of a single revolution; rather [their revolutionary subjectivity] arise[s] as a moral force that is diffused among the people. Against the imposition (of hegemony), Zapatistas counter-pose the recognition of difference. The slogan “to lead by obeying” means that public assemblies

directly elect officials and can revoke the mandates; accountability to the community is as with the conduct of communitary work; all these qualities are important to the construction of new political practices.



Postales Zapatistas. Courtesy of [Javier Soria](#).

The exercise and construction of power in the Caracoles and the Good Government is not done under the logic of the state, i.e., the centralization of power and domination; instead of concentrating political power in one man [sic] or an institution, Indigenous Zapatista communities realize a form of equitable redistribution of power, where each community member has the ability to influence the decisions of the community, accompanied by a direct democracy and power generated from the community:

*The Zapatista Caracoles also represent a rupture with the vision of the revolutionary movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that sought to take power by force and then change the world. Instead rebel Mayas build power from below (the micro) and in this form seek to create resistance networks with other communities or other movements. (Romero, 2010: Internet)*

The autonomous organization of Indigenous communities is not new. In Mexico, three quarters of the municipalities of Oaxaca – with 15 distinct coexisting ethnic groups – elect their authorities according to customary law and approximately 70 percent of the state’s population is governed by Indigenous authorities. In more than 400 municipalities “community self-determination” is conducted through the management of local affairs and the administration and protection of communal lands, natural resources, and culture (Le Bot, 1998, March 29: Internet).

However, it is the Zapatistas that have bestowed emancipatory, rebellious, independent, and self-managed forms of organization on Indigenous governance and exercise of authority. Direct democracy practiced in Zapatista communities under the principle of *mandar obedecer* and especially with the creation of Good Government Juntas is what makes [Indigenous authority] different in the Zapatista movement[s]. Ramírez (2008: 63) explains how the social constructions holding the movement together are examples of the real possibilities of creating spaces [territories] that work and nurture the movement by building a political culture of participatory and direct democracy that is itself a product of the political practice of obeying the basis of the construction and strengthening of autonomy and will be the basis of the maintenance of these political structures: Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities and Good Government.

With few economic resources men, women, children, and elderly of the Zapatista Indigenous communities organize their schools, nursing homes, hospitals, cooperatives, pharmacies, [and] commercial wineries; all those projects encompass what they define as autonomy. What seems clear is the breaking of relations with the institutions of government, with [constituted] power; without forcing the people, the civil society to organize the Zapatista way; in this way, [Indigenous people] seek an emancipatory relationship that respects culture and traditional knowledge of the local territorial dimension [*conocimiento tradicional en una dimensión territorial local*].

The practices offered to the world by tens of thousands of men, women and children, Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Tojolabales, Choles, Zoques, Mames and mestiza/os – all of them Zapatistas – are the social laboratory of autonomy and self-government that challenge the international community, the [so-called] “first world” to walk together with the Zapatistas, [and embrace] practices that contradict the idea of representative democracy that exists not only in Mexico but in the rest of the world.

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