

Women's Contributions to Living Fully in a Tseltal Indigenous Information System

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Abstract. We discuss the role of women in endogenous community development among the Tseltal indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico. This is part of a Tseltal integrated information system that ties community radio, library, and evaluation system to support community development activities that promote the notion of living fully, or in Tseltal language, “Lekil Cuxlejalil.” We identify key themes based on the testimonies of women working in Tseltal community development and discuss how they support the integrated information systems.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Social Change, Information Seeking & Use

1 Introduction

The Tseltal Maya are one of 25 Maya groups in southern Mexico and Central America and live in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Since 2015, the Information School at the University of Washington, along with their partners, One Equal Heart Foundation, the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón, local nonprofit CEDIAC, and the Tseltal communities, have been collaborating to create an Tseltal information system that aims to integrate three initiatives: a community radio, a library, and an evaluation system. This collaboration has been named SIET, a Spanish acronym that stands for *Integrated System for Tseltal Information and Evaluation*. With SIET, we helped develop the first Tseltal library and strengthen a community radio station, and initiated an evaluation process to document, through photos and storytelling, the activities that contribute to an endogenous understanding of living fully, or in Tseltal language, “lekil cuxlejalil,” a concept that is centered on achieving harmony in community. Building on those notions of living fully, we explore the role of women in their communities and their contribution to local development. We present a preliminary illustration of this work and how it will influence the development of an information system in the region.

2 Notions of Development: Living Fully or “Lekil Cuxlejilil”

Through our previous work with Tseltal communities, we identified four themes that are central to the Tseltal indigenous concept of living fully: spirit, food, water, and community (Gomez et.al. 2017). These themes now inform how the library organizes its materials and how the radio station will continue to develop programming. They also provide a baseline for evaluation through Fotohistorias; Fotohistorias is a participatory photography methodology to document life and experiences of participants in their own words. (Gomez & Vanini, 2015) Through Fotohistorias, participants are able to create or select images that represent their stories, and talk about them in a narrative way that is convergent with their storytelling-based oral tradition. The resulting testimonies offer candid and often profound perspectives of participants’ experiences. There is a concern among indigenous communities that knowledge is often extracted from communities from outsiders, but is never returned. Contrary to this common practice, participants trust the Fotohistorias process when they see that they determine the topics, the images and the stories that tell their experience from their perspective, and they get the immediate results in their hands: they receive copies of pictures (we carry a portable printer), they hear their own voices in the radio programs, and they get copies of the photo books we print with the results of our work. For example, one Tseltal participant noted the benefit of using Fotohistorias for evaluation due to its transparency in relaying a “true” experience of life in communities: “Fotohistorias really helps us a lot because what you are showing is the truth. We were the ones that chose what to show and how to show it, and those are our words, so what you show is our truth.” - Juan Miguel Hernández Álvarez, (Gomez et al, 2017).

3 Using Participatory Methods

We used Fotohistorias, a qualitative method based on participatory photography and interviews with community participants. This also calls for brief workshops that give the research team and opportunity to talk through the method and demonstrate the use of recorders and tablets to the participating community members. This method elicits community voices and experiences, making the research process more inclusive for participants, as opposed to a more traditional participant-observation model.

4 Women’s Contribution to Living Fully

Through participatory photography, images and testimonies were collected from women who work in development activities among the Tseltal communities. Based on the notions of “Lekil Cuxlejilil”, we probe for ways in which the work of women contributes to living fully in the Tseltal communities. Women’s stories were coded and analyzed to result in five emerging themes:

- (1) **Culture and Identity:** women play a key role in nurturing, maintaining and promoting culture, language and religion, key elements of the Tseltal identity.

Women's role in church activities is an important gateway to broader participation in other development activities.

- (2) **Women across Generations:** the experience of elders (grandmothers) was dramatically different from today's adults (mothers), which is dramatically different from today's youth and children: women have gained more independence and autonomy, but family ties may have suffered as a result.
- (3) **Productive Processes:** women are leaders in alternative economic projects that benefit the community: microcredit, weaving, and miscellaneous coop initiatives help women contribute to economic wellbeing.
- (4) **Care of Mother Earth:** women are in charge of earthworm farming, which enables organic production of fruits and vegetables; they also participate in other activities that take care of the environment for future generations.
- (5) **Women's and Children's Rights:** education and training activities help women be more aware, protect and promote their rights and those of their children, and offers them opportunities to participate in a wider range of social and economic activities.

Through participatory photography and interviews, Fotohistorias allows us to get a better understanding of what motivates Tseltal women to participate in a myriad of roles, from becoming accountants in the embroidery cooperative to working for women's rights, or becoming caretakers of the earth. Women are an integral part Tseltal community life and are not only practitioners of vital work; they are also communicators and mentors, passing on their knowledge to their children or other young women in their communities.

The contribution of women to living fully in ways that preserve and promote traditional indigenous values is a delicate balance: while traditionally women were limited to marrying young, preparing food and raising children, today's Tseltal women make other important contributions to their communities as they maintain their culture and values.



Image 1: Tseltal human rights lawyer speaks with Tseltal women about their work in their communities.

5 Conclusion

Because women play a key role in every aspect of community life, they are integral to the creation of a fully formed information system. Tseltal women are active in the creation and presentation of information, including radio programming and the classification of library materials. Through Fotohistorias we uncover specific ways in which women experience their contribution to quality of life in their communities: they help preserve and promote culture and identity, they are gaining increasing independence from one generation to the next, and they increasingly participate in productive processes, in care and stewardship of the environment, and in awareness and protection of women's and children's rights in their indigenous communities.

The contribution of women to the development of Tseltal communities is vital to the creation of harmony, key concept in "Lekil Cuxlejalil". Women are active in their communities and understand the necessity of being present in the work that is required to develop healthy communities. Through this participatory photography work, we document, collect and organize the testimonies of Tseltal women to better understand their contribution to community development from an endogenous, indigenous perspective.

References

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