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WALKING WHILE ASKING:  
LESSONS FROM AGROECOLOGY EDUCATION IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

By

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Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Science in Environmental Studies

The University of Montana, Missoula, MT

December 2019

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Walking While Asking: Lessons from Agroecology Education in Chiapas, Mexico

Committee Chairperson: Dr. Neva Hassanein

This professional paper presents an assessment of the most recent project of Schools for Chiapas (SfC), a U.S.-based solidarity organization working in collaboration with the Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico. It examines the challenges and potentials of SfC's efforts to implement food forests at 16 autonomous secondary schools. I contextualize this work within a larger conversation amongst food sovereignty activists and scholars around efforts to scale-out the use of agroecology through education. As the organization looks to continue its efforts in a similar vein, this paper analyzes potential for advancement in this area.

The Zapatistas, an insurgent movement of indigenous Mayan peasant communities, have spent the last 26 years establishing autonomous systems of governance, health, education and agroecological production. For the Zapatistas, as for rural movements throughout Latin America, agroecology plays an essential role in the cultural continuity and autonomy of rural communities, drawing on traditional local knowledge to sustain healthful food systems within the capacity of the land. Movements within the global alliance of *La Via Campesina* see agroecology as the tool by which they enact their demand for food sovereignty and "social relations free of oppression and inequality." As such, efforts to extend critical theory and practices of agroecology through education are vital to strengthening their movements and defending indigenous and rural livelihoods and cultures. Scholars and activists within these movements document and analyze the pedagogical practices of these efforts.

My analysis draws on in-depth interviews with founders, staff and volunteers of Schools for Chiapas, as well as two other examples in Chiapas of efforts to "scale-out" agroecology through education. My own observations of the food forest initiative (FFI) during a 6-week internship and subsequent employment with SfC also offer personal experiences through which I interpret the execution of the FFI. This paper describes and analyses these experiences and conversations in order to glean lessons that might inform SfC's future efforts. Though Schools for Chiapas' relationship with Zapatista autonomy is unique, my conclusions are concurrent with themes in agroecological education in other movements.

# Acknowledgements

I want to offer my sincere gratitude to those who have made my work possible, given of their time and insight, and offered encouragement and support:

To Peter Brown and Susan Beattie of Schools for Chiapas, who have welcomed my participation in the organization and allowed me to reconnect to the place where my understanding of justice was born. I want to honor their dedication and passion over the last 23 years, and thank them for the opportunity to learn with them.

To Neva Hassanein, my advisor, for her thoughtful guidance in walking me through the complex dimensions of an ever-evolving research project. I am grateful for her meticulous reading of my first drafts, her gentle counsel, and her encouragement and camaraderie.

To Dan Spencer, for being on my committee, and his contemplative questions and graciousness.

To Peter Rosset, for being on my committee, for his responsiveness, generosity, and for the wealth of insight he brings to the subject matter.

To my friends both human and other than human for taking care of me and making me laugh -- Kurt, Sarah, Israel, Julie, Casey, Michelle, Scout, and Vergil. I love you.

To the Mayan women, men, and youth that make up the Zapatista bases of support. Their vision for a world in which many worlds fit has left its mark on all the people that I spoke to in the course of my research. This work, as much of the work throughout my life, is motivated by their courageous and dignified struggle.

Thanks to the generous Wiancko Environmental Studies Scholarship that helped make my own scholarship possible.

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## List of Acronyms

<b>CLOC-LVC</b>	<b>Latin American Coordination of Rural Workers-La Via Campesina</b>
<b>CRAREZ</b>	<b>Zapatista Center of Autonomous Resistance and Rebellion</b>
<b>ESRAZ</b>	<b>Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Secondary School</b>
<b>EZLN</b>	<b>Zapatista Army of National Liberation</b>
<b>FFI</b>	<b>Food Forest Initiative</b>
<b>LVC</b>	<b>La Via Campesina</b>
<b>MAREZ</b>	<b>Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipality</b>
<b>RCHE</b>	<b>Red Chiapaneca de Huertos Educativos</b>
<b>SERAZ</b>	<b>Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System</b>
<b>SfC</b>	<b>Schools for Chiapas</b>

# Chapter One: The Call to A World in Which Many Fit

“The world that we want is one in which many worlds fit. The Homeland that we build is one in which all peoples and their languages fit, all of their steps may walk, all may have laughter, and all may wake to the dawn.” -Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, January 1, 1996-  
CCRI-EZLN

## Introduction

On January 1, 1994, an armed insurgency of indigenous Mayans seized the town halls of seven municipalities in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, in a region locally referred to as the *las cañadas*, the canyons. This surprise action drew attention from around the globe. With an emphatic “Enough is enough!” the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, decried five centuries of marginalization, exploitation, and genocide. In the years following the uprising, San Cristóbal de las Casas, one of those municipalities, and a center of commerce for the state, became a hub for activists and travelers who had come to participate in the revolution. I first traveled to San Cristóbal de las Casas in the spring of 1997, on break from a semester abroad in Oaxaca. Inspired by the indigenous struggle like so many others, I sought to contribute to a “world in which many worlds fit,”<sup>1</sup> the world the Zapatistas were fighting for. For two full seasons, I lived in an

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<sup>1</sup> *Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* is one of many poetic expressions of the demands of the Zapatista bases of support. It refers to a world where a plurality of ways of knowing and being can coexist. (Marcos and Ezln 1996).

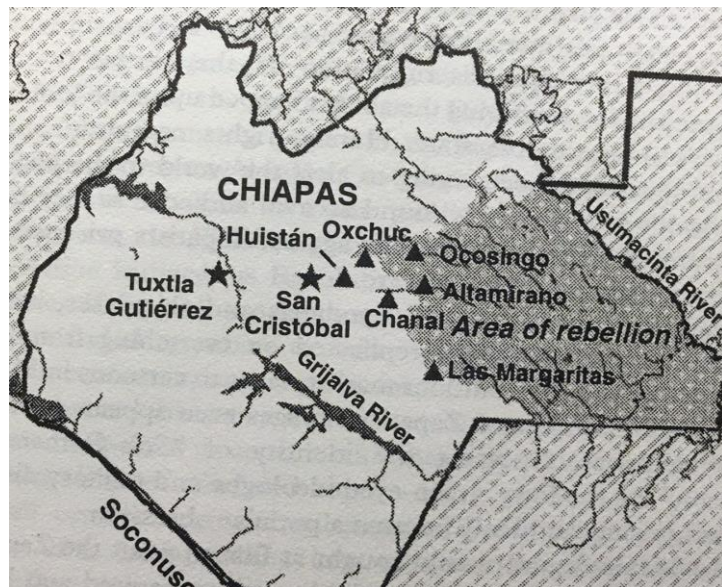


international human rights encampment in Zapatista-controlled territories of Chiapas, Mexico.

The Zapatistas, named for Emiliano Zapata, the southern *campesino* commander in the Mexican Revolution, “rose up against the Mexican government, only to find that it didn’t exist”<sup>2</sup>(Stahler-Sholk 2007). Over a decade of neoliberal reforms, including the stripping of agrarian provisions for communally-held land from the Mexican constitution, had privatized national resources, deregulated trade and financial markets, and the eliminated social safety nets. The Zapatistas were, in essence, at war with the new world order. The EZLN cited the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which would inundate Mexican markets with cheap U.S. corn, as the final

death blow to the Mayan way of life. In the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, the EZLN declared war on the Mexican government, and called on the people of Mexico to support them in their struggle for these

demands: work, land, housing, healthcare,



Map from George A. Collier. 1994. *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*. Oakland, California:Institute for Food and Development Policy.

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<sup>2</sup> Big Noise Tactical Media, 2000. <http://www.bignoisefilms.com>.

education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace. Their rebellious dignity and righteous poetry invoked the suffering of centuries, inspiring solidarity from people in struggle everywhere.

Despite the ceasefire on January 12th, 1994 the Mexican government intensified its militarization of the region, placing over 70,000 federal troops in Chiapas (García De León 1995). Human rights organizations called upon international observers, *campesmentistas*, as we were called, to monitor the military presence in the zone. During our days and weeks and months in the *campesino* communities in resistance, we volunteered in any capacity that they would have us, and shared everything from dancing to marimba to washing our laundry in the river. We gathered to celebrate Christmas and the Day of the Dead, and also to mourn the horrific tragedy of the massacre in Acteal (Baronnet, Bayo, and Stahler-Sholk 2011; Muñoz Ramírez 2003). The intimacy of sharing in the daily lives of some 200 community members, experiencing their generosity and thoughtfulness, and listening to their perspectives on their struggle for justice, impacted me at an almost cellular level. I can still hear the wings of the blue morpho butterfly, as I stood on the mountainside, plucking ripe coffee berries into my bucket and listening to the *corridos* sung by the children. The nine months that I spent living in the small Zapatista community in the jungle set the course of my adult life. It has guided nearly twenty years in agriculture and activism, the organizing of a cooperative, research in ethnobotany, and my current curiosity about and reverence for

other ways of knowing and being. Twenty years later, I discovered the work of Schools for Chiapas.

Schools for Chiapas, a San Diego-based solidarity organization, came into being during that same whirlwind of the mid-late 1990's. Founders of the organization, including its current co-director, Peter Brown, were performing a piece entitled "Yo Soy Zapatista" in the United States, when they were invited by Zapatista spokesperson, SubComandante Marcos, to attend and perform the piece for the Zapatista-hosted National Democratic Convention in 1994. Two years later, Schools for Chiapas (SfC) came into being at the first international gathering hosted in Zapatista-controlled lands, the "First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism."

In 1997, SfC undertook its first official project at what would become the 2nd of the five *caracoles*, or centers of autonomous governance, Oventik. Schools for Chiapas funded the construction of the first Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Secondary School (ESRAZ), which according to the specifications of the EZLN leadership, would be a "center of learning to save the planet," a boarding school with space for 200 girls, 200 boys, library, dining hall and six large classroom spaces (Schools for Chiapas N.d.). Since that time, Schools for Chiapas has provided resources for school construction, training for education promoters, and materials in the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System (SERAZ).

SfC's *intercambio*, or exchange, with the communities in resistance is dynamic. Despite its explicit focus on education, Schools for Chiapas' solidarity has traversed many aspects of Zapatista autonomy. Shifting with the winds of the movement, Peter Brown and others involved have navigated the tides of security crises, changes to EZLN structure, and even deportation from Mexico. By 2015, SfC had a long history of conducting workshops in various practices in agroecology, or ecological agriculture, from raising awareness about genetically modified organisms and Zapatista seeds, to native bee-keeping and planting trees. Nearly two decades of solidarity had paved the way for its most recent initiative — the establishment of food forests, or “edible forests,” at 16 secondary boarding schools in the autonomous *caracol* of Morelia. It is this ambitious project that this paper explores.

My discovery of Schools for Chiapas and its current work with the food forests, was prompted by a desire to return to the place of my own *concientización*, and in particular, to apprentice myself to the Mayan *cosmovisión*, or way of understanding the world. My interest in decolonial processes, and reverence for indigenous language and knowledge are at the heart of my research. I had a healthy skepticism about engaging with a U.S.-based organization, and I wondered what a *gringo* organization might offer indigenous peasant communities in the way of agricultural know-how. Despite these doubts, after several conversations with Peter Brown, I signed myself up for a six-week internship in the spring of 2018.

## **Background and Significance**

The project idea for the food forests came as a result of lengthy negotiations between Schools for Chiapas and the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, that is, the Zapatista autonomous “council of good government” of the zone. Between early 2014 and mid-2015, from conversations among the community assemblies, the Education Committee of the zone, and Schools for Chiapas, a proposal for perennial polycultures of fruit trees and medicinal plants finally emerged. The “edible forests,” in Spanish translation, would diversify food sources, supplement nutrition, and provide medicines for the communities. Schools for Chiapas would provide: plants from its own nursery in San Cristóbal de las Casas; the workshops, typically held four times a year; transportation for students and educators; and food for all who attended. Chaperoned by two or more members of the Education Committee, delegate students and educators from as many schools as possible would convene for a three or four-day workshop. In extending concepts in agroecology like nutrient cycling, erosion control, companion planting, and living fences through the schools, the food forest initiative (FFI) would be a clear contribution to Zapatista autonomy.

For the Mayan peasants, like so many communities throughout the Global South, life with dignity and cultural continuity depends on access to and careful stewardship of the land. The ability to produce healthy, culturally-appropriate food, while sustaining Earth’s vital resources, is key to indigenous autonomy and self-determination. Agroecology, in applying ecological principles to agriculture and living in reciprocity with the land, is a

practice that sustains this autonomy. Therefore, for social movements like the Zapatistas or the global alliance of *La Via Campesina*, interpretations of agroecology include social and economic dimensions (Van der Ploeg 2011; Wezel et al. 2009). As these movements mobilize against a worldview that threatens the planet, their definition of agroecology encompasses the *political* ecology of food systems (Francis et al. 2003). The global alliance of indigenous, peasant, fisherfolk and forest dweller organizations that make up *La Via Campesina* (LVC), including the Latin American Coordination of Rural Workers (CLOC-LVC), deploys agroecology as a tool for food sovereignty and self-determination in defense of peasant territories (McCune and Sánchez 2018). In order to sustain a world in which many fit, these movements must continue to mobilize across territories, and to reverse the trend of capitalist hegemony. The physical “scaling out” across territories also implies simultaneous social transformation toward a new kind of society. Education, or *formación*, is vital to this struggle.

It is with this lens that I examine the efforts of Schools for Chiapas toward the establishment of food forests at Zapatista secondary schools. During my volunteer internship with SfC in the spring of 2018, I participated in one food forest workshop, assisted the staff in the San Cristóbal nursery, and visited another of the food forest sites on a mural painting delegation. Given the role that agroecology plays in food autonomy and defense of territory, I proposed to Peter Brown and his partner Susan Beattie, that the future of the initiative could benefit from interviewing the participants.

Though there were clear indications from participants about “what worked” in the workshops, SfC had not received critical feedback or suggestions from which to modify the workshop process. Accordingly, my proposal to engage young educators and students about their interests, I hoped, would be an opportunity not only to evaluate and guide SfC’s workshop practices, but also to engage the students in dialogue about the priorities in their communities, their knowledge about the land, and their vision for autonomy.

Unfortunately, that goal could not be fully realized. At the time that my research was to begin, in early February 2019, Peter and I were in San Cristóbal preparing for a scheduled workshop in Morelia, when we received notice that the workshop could not take place. Due to increased military presence and paramilitary threats, the Zapatistas closed their communities to outsiders. According to a message that Peter received from the Education Committee, we should wait to receive direction as to if/when we should meet with the *Junta*. That same week, Zapatista women published a chilling letter, cancelling a planned international encounter, due to heightened tensions in their territories. Workshop facilitators, coming from the state of Veracruz, had to cancel their travel plans abruptly. Though we were finally able to meet with the *Junta*, the workshop was never rescheduled. In the middle of August 2019, the spokesperson for the EZLN announced the addition of seven new centers of autonomous governance (CRAREZ), implying a major restructuring of the Zapatista organization. Finally, in a meeting in early September, members of the Education Committee of Morelia informed Schools for

Chiapas directors and nursery staff that the food forest initiative would be cancelled following a final delivery of plants to the existing plots. They did not provide Peter and Susan with any explanation. Several dramatic turns of events, both in the personal lives of Schools for Chiapas founders, as well as in Zapatista territory have altered the course of my research. As with agroecology, though, one adapts according to the landscape.

Just prior to the cancellation of the workshop in February, Peter and Susan asked me if I would be interested in taking on some leadership in Schools for Chiapas. They expressed their acknowledgement that SfC is at a point of transition, (in part, related to their getting older, but also to the shifting structure of the EZLN). They felt that the long-term viability of the organization would require a sustainable source of governance and a renewable source of energy. My response at the time reflects my feelings still. I am honored and thrilled at the opportunity, and simultaneously conflicted and wary. The role of privileged northerners in marginalized communities of the Global South is a complicated one, and a responsibility I don't accept lightly. That said, Schools for Chiapas, in its 23 years of working alongside Zapatista processes, holds a truly unique relationship with the autonomous Mayan communities. What the organization is able to learn and share from that experience may be its greatest benefit to the struggle. The opportunity to expand on that is exciting, and also daunting.



## Objectives

Evolving out of my conversations and work with Schools for Chiapas, this professional paper presents a general assessment of the food forest initiative (FFI), describing its achievements as well as its challenges. At the time of writing, SfC is looking to redirect its efforts. Fortunately, the transition in Schools for Chiapas seems to be a perfect pause for reflection and evaluation. My analysis of the FFI draws from the literature on agroecological *formación*<sup>3</sup> in the rural social movements of *La Via Campesina* and CLOC-LVC, in addition to Chiapas examples whose experience in agroecology is pertinent. As SfC looks to continue its work with the Zapatista communities in resistance amidst a changing political landscape, this report reflects on the potential for the organization's continued role in support of agroecology education, and its role in general.

## Methods and Positionality

The navigation of dynamic political waters that surround a revolutionary movement in a nation in turmoil, in increasingly violent times, does not always go according to plan. What was to be an evaluation of the Schools for Chiapas food forest initiative through the eyes of Zapatista youth educators and students became a more general observational assessment of the organization's contributions to agroecology education. The new tack of my question required that I begin to understand the lay of the land with

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<sup>3</sup> Che Guevara's use of the word *formación* for 'training' or 'education,' means to shape the individual for the collective, for participation in a harmonious egalitarian society (McCune et al. 2017)

regard to historical relationships, alliances, and antagonisms that make up the complicated fabric of the political struggles in Chiapas. One person of confidence that I spoke with referred to it as a “minefield.” Many of my communications and observations were to identify where Schools for Chiapas stood in that minefield.

As a result of this, my research for this project is comprised of in-depth, unstructured interviews and participant observation between February 2018 and September 2019. I have interviewed and talked at length, both in Chiapas and in the U.S., with Peter Brown, the founder of SfC about the history of the organization, in particular with regard to the food forest project. I also spoke with two facilitators and two assistants who have participated in the food forest workshops that SfC has conducted, as well as the two staff members of the nursery in San Cristóbal. In order to contextualize these conversations and my observations within the frame of agroecology education, I interviewed two people who are, in essence, working to “scale-out” agroecology through some form of education. For an agroecologist who works with networks of *campesinos*, the work is clearly different than training teachers in using school gardens as a tool for education. However, analysis of themes that recurred in these conversations was consistent with challenges, as well as principles and practices that I found in the literature.

The rich and varied experiences in which I have been a participant observer present an equally complex assortment of information. Taken over the last year-and-a-half, my field

notes include descriptions of: my experiences as a volunteer with Schools for Chiapas in one two-and-a-half day food forest workshop; a weeklong mural-painting delegation in which we visited a food forest site; various trips to visit the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* in Morelia; my conversations with community members in Zapatista communities; conversations with kindred *compañer@s de lucha* and shared activities with their organizations; working alongside the indigenous staff of the SfC in San Cristóbal, attendance of the First National Mexican Congress of Agroecology, and my own history with the place and this struggle. These notes document the nostalgia, curiosity, apprehension, rage, fear, curiosity, awe, and joyous gratitude that I have felt. They reflect my passion for the Zapatista struggle and vision, and also my internal conflicts. The existential challenges of confronting oneself as an unwitting agent of neo-colonialism weigh heavily, particularly in the setting of a colonial city/international tourist destination plopped down on indigenous Mayan land. This tension infuses my interpretations of these findings, whether explicit or not.

In my current role working with Schools for Chiapas, I remind myself that de-colonizing work begins with questioning assumptions about how we know what we know, and how that inquiry leads to more thoughtful action. In the spirit of *caminar preguntando*<sup>4</sup>, walking while asking questions, this work represents the reflection that necessarily accompanies action. I am humbled by the experience, and grateful for the opportunity.

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<sup>4</sup> Caminar preguntando expresses the perpetual cycle of inquiry that defines Zapatista action.

This paper flows as follows: in Chapter Two, I contextualize the efforts of Schools for Chiapas in contributing to agroecology education in autonomous Zapatista territory with respect to that of rural social movements in other places in Latin America. In Chapter Three, I describe and analyze the “edible forest” initiative with the Zapatista autonomous schools. In seeking context for SfC’s work with the food forests, I draw on themes from the literature on scaling-out agroecology through education, in addition to local, Chiapas examples for comparison. In Chapter Four, I explore lessons learned and make general recommendations with regard to Schools for Chiapas’ future role in agroecology education in the Zapatista communities, and its role in solidarity.

## Chapter Two: Agroecology Education and Autonomy

The food forest initiative (FFI) that Schools for Chiapas (SfC) embarked upon with the Education Committee in Morelia, though founded in well-established relationships, had no precedent in the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ). Coordinated between a U.S.-based solidarity organization and remote indigenous communities, in the territory between two pillars of Zapatista autonomy, the project navigated uncharted waters. In this chapter, I contextualize the role of the FFI in relation to Zapatista autonomy, and draw connections to the larger conversation around “scaling-out” agroecology through education taking place in the rural social movements of *La Via Campesina*. In order to make these connections, I provide brief explanations of the significance of both education and agroecology to Zapatista autonomy. I then present the parallel movement of *La Via Campesina*, the significance of agroecology in defense

of the physical and cultural territories of peasant and indigenous communities, and the role of agroecology education in sustaining this struggle. In this light, I explore the FFI as an example of agroecology education.

## **Zapatista Autonomy**

In a process mediated by the Bishop of San Cristóbal, the EZLN engaged intermittently in peace negotiations with the Mexican government for years after the ceasefire, despite massive military escalation and aggression by the Mexican Federal Army. In 1996, the parties signed a set of agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture, known as the Accords of San Andres (Barbosa 2015; Baronnet et al. 2011; Muñoz Ramírez 2003; Reyes and Kaufman 2011; Stahler-Sholk 2007; Starr, Martínez-Torres, and Rosset 2011). The state never met the conditions for their implementation, however. Plagued by neglect, deceit and wanton betrayal by the Mexican government, the process collapsed completely in 2001 (Reyes and Kaufman 2011; Stahler-Sholk 2007). Finally, in 2003, after a long silence, the EZLN announced that it would enact the agreements set forth in the San Andres Accords unilaterally in its zones of influence.

The development marked the separation of the civil authority of the Zapatista support bases from the military authority of the EZLN, and the formal enactment of Zapatista autonomy in August of 2003 (Barbosa 2015; Barbosa and Sollano 2014; Baronnet 2008, 2011; Stahler-Sholk 2007). The announcement accompanied the inauguration of its new political and cultural centers, *caracoles*, which would be the seats for the five regional

*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, or councils of good government. In addition to the *Juntas*, the communities of each *caracol* establish committees responsible for oversight of the three pillars of autonomy -- health, education, and agroecological production and commercialization. The third pillar, which includes building local economies, establishing producer cooperatives, and vocational training, is the “home” of agroecological farming (Starr et al. 2011). Each of these areas are responsible for building the systems to train and sustain “promoters” whose roles are to share knowledge in the communities.

The new structures of Zapatista autonomy at that time became the gatekeepers for solidarity initiatives. For organizations like Schools for Chiapas, this meant that their work would be channeled through and overseen by one of the committees of the three priority pillars of autonomy. In the construction of autonomy, outsiders do contribute to the advancement of certain initiatives, and these alliances are quite essential for the political solidarity and resources they provide. The goal, however, is that the communities are able to carry on without external support. Indeed, many non-governmental organizations working in support capacities have found that their services were no longer needed. Autonomy is just that --freedom from dependency and entanglement. With the formation of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, outside organizations make proposals to the *Junta* of the zone, where it may undergo several modifications according to the needs in the region. At that point, the implementation of the initiative and its subsequent details falls under the purview of the committee

corresponding to the priority area, which, in the case of the food forest initiative, was the Education Committee.

## **Zapatista Education**

Zapatista bases of support began establishing their processes for autonomous education immediately following the uprising. The urgency of this endeavor became apparent during my time in the human rights encampment. *Campementistas*, as we international observers were called, were addressed by the title of “*Maestra/o (Name)*.” In part, this was due to the fact that we often held classes while local education promoters attended these training intensives (Baronnet 2011). I remember Oscar, the teacher, or education promoter, leaving amidst intense militarization and counterinsurgency mobilizations to participate in encounters on the nature and content of Zapatista education.

On several occasions over the past year and a half with Schools for Chiapas, we visited the site of a “recuperated”<sup>5</sup> *hacienda* taken by the rebels during the uprising: The once-stately building sits on a slope overlooking a river valley and its former domain. Beyond the grand arches of the veranda, in the rooms where the *patrón* once lived, piles of rubble lie around. Adobe bricks, shaped from reddish earth and indigenous labor extracted from the land are exposed, leaving only traces of ornately-painted plaster in

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<sup>5</sup> Recuperated territory is how the Zapatistas refer to land that they recovered during the 1994 insurgency. Many Zapatista communities sit on the former estates of their oppressors, large land-holdings that had formerly been cattle ranches, or sugar or coffee plantations.

the corners of the grand room. Written in red marker on the wall of a sun-lit room to the south were these words — “January 12, 1994 Our first school, EZLN.”

These examples offer their testimony to the long-anticipated moment in which the Mayan communities would realize their own education. As soon as the ceasefire with the Mexican army was declared, the Zapatistas began making preparations for a new world — one that would begin with the decolonized education of the next generation.

The Zapatistas cite many reasons for establishing community-controlled, autonomous schools — among them, abuse of indigenous students by the “official” teachers and the cultural irrelevance of the materials and curriculum. Officials ignored public demands for culturally relevant indigenous education at the Indigenous Congress in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas in 1974. Public education in the rural regions throughout Mexico continues, to this day, to be fraught with neglect, abuse, and overall instability (Baronnet 2011). Indigenous communities in subsequent decades came to expect that teachers from outside had neither responsibility to, nor respect for the community processes, and that their function was one of assimilation.

*“Las escuelas oficiales enseñan puro inglés,”* a member of the Zapatista Education Committee told me. That is, the “official” schools (as government funded schools are referred to in Zapatista territory) teach pure English. “Pure English,” does not refer to teaching the English language (though that might also be the case), but rather, to the



cultural conditioning of students to become participants in a hegemonic capitalist system. This fact makes the role of outsiders in education especially sensitive. Rural students in conventional schools learn that the purpose of education is to leave the countryside, with the overwhelming message being, that a campesino, or indigenous is inferior to the “modern” ways of the city (Ferguson et al. 2019; McCune and Sánchez 2018).

Zapatista autonomous education, on the other hand, is an unprecedented experiment in liberatory education, defying homogenization. Core curriculum is strictly a matter of community concern. Students in the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System in Rebellion (SERAZ) receive an education that gives priority to their local language and culture (Baronnet 2008). The understanding in the SERAZ is that education is born of the “values, the necessities and the priorities” of the communities, and everyone is learning together one step at a time (Baronnet 2011). Learning that comes from the community maintains a fluidity between the classroom and the countryside, in which the curriculum is contextualized in the everyday experiences of the students, and knowledge emerges through inquiry-based learning (Barbosa 2015; Morales et al 2017).

The education promoters’ training is influenced by liberatory pedagogies articulated by Paulo Freire of Brazil, and brought to the Mexican countryside by catechists of the Catholic church in the 60’s and 70’s (Baronnet 2008; Baronnet et al. 2011). In this style of education, promoters in the SERAZ, who are often quite young themselves, learn to

become facilitators of the collective experience of teaching-learning, wherein all participants are considered equally capable of contributing knowledge (Barbosa 2015). Entry into positions of community responsibility and education valorizes indigenous culture and steeps youth more deeply in the participatory processes of autonomy (Baronnet 2008). The promoters are supported, supervised and evaluated by the community itself through the community assembly, and receive guidance from the zonal Education Committee, or *Comité*. The *Comité*, with input from the communities, designs curriculum that is relevant to the lives of the youth in their socio-historical reality. The horizontal pedagogies within the Zapatista education system of model teaching-learning, and collective knowledge production which I emphasize in this assessment.

The tremendous collective energy that the Zapatistas dedicate to education is at once visionary and practical. As Lia Pinheiro Barbosa notes, “a liberatory education constitutes a fundamental political act in the process of emancipation” (Barbosa 2015).

She quotes Josué, a Member of the General Coordination for the SERAZ:

We have seen that the reality that we are living is better understood, that consciousness is created and a different mentality emerges. It's not that one comes to be convinced of the struggle, what happens is that here they grasp more elements and tools to know their rights and defend themselves. Education, without a doubt, motivates us in our struggle and strengthens the autonomy of our communities (Barbosa 2015). (my translation)

In the 26 years since the uprising, autonomous education has produced a generation of young Mayans whose social and political orientation has been shaped by and for the

movement. Guided by the Seven Zapatista Principles, a credo by which the Zapatista Municipalities in Resistance learn to conduct themselves, students participate in a collective construction of their education to address the future of their autonomy.

Contributions to this effort are both visionary and practical, and rooted in the priorities of the communities. Education, in particular the development of secondary schools (ESRAZ), has developed “according to the times and ways” of the individual regions (Barbosa 2015). Oventik, *Caracol II*, has a single ESRAZ, the initial school construction by SfC, where all of the secondary students attend. In comparison, Morelia, *Caracol IV*, has sixteen. The curricular themes of the ESRAZ, as with the primary schools, are developed by the Education Committee of the Zone with agreement of promoters and community assemblies. Zapatista education alternates between school-time and community time, with the understanding that these aspects of learning are necessarily integrated. As such, the *milpa* becomes a pedagogical space where this connection is made (Barbosa 2015). In the ESRAZ boarding schools, students participate in the collective planning of their education, an education that includes maintenance of the school itself, collective work in the school’s *milpa*, and preparation of meals. The educational space reinforces indigenous *campesino* ways of knowing and living in very intentional ways.

The three interwoven pillars of autonomy, though, have not developed uniformly throughout the Zapatista territories. Whereas implementation of agroecology has been robust in Oventik, *Caracol II*, the Committee on Agroecology no longer exists in Morelia,

*Caracol IV*. In this case, the proliferation of agroecology falls to the Education Committee. Communities may agree that agroecological peasant production practices need to be reproduced, but agroecology education, per se, has no fixed place or agreed upon curriculum. It was in this gray area, that Schools for Chiapas came to play a role in Zapatista agroecology education.

## **Agroecology**

Agroecology is a key component of another pillar of Zapatista autonomy, which has been variously referred to as agroecology, production, or production and commercialization, depending on the zone. This pillar also includes the organization of cooperatives, transportation of products, and vocational training. As the Zapatistas are *campesinos*, agroecological farming practices, which both liberate them from dependency on costly inputs and restore the land, are at the core of their autonomy (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013a; Starr et al. 2011; Van der Ploeg 2011).

Agroecological practices and cooperative work form the foundations of local economies rooted in diverse and sustainable production (Starr et al. 2011). But this is not all.

Agroecology, for the Mayan communities, embodies the defense of land and territory and food autonomy against the homogenizing forces of a knowledge system that threatens to “crush diversity into the same” (Grosfoguel 2017; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013a). It is an encounter that reinforces cultural identity, in which ancestral knowledge illuminates the path forward. As a

practice in taking care of Mother Nature, agroecology is central to the Mayan Tsel'tal principle of *lekil kuxlejal*, or living harmoniously with all that is.

An agroecologist who accompanies Zapatista communities in their production practices shared, “We consider that agroecology has to consider relationships of justice. So then, what does it mean to say that the peasant has the right to live fully like any other individual on the earth?” The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and its bases of support have spent the last 26 years enacting the answer to this question. The Zapatista communities embrace agroecology not only as a set of practices, but as a mechanism for sowing a new world in the cracks of the old. Their struggle for autonomy is intimately connected to the health of soils, the diversity of species, and the cleanliness of water. It is a struggle for a world where the many ways of knowing and being can coexist and complement one another.

### **La Via Campesina - A Parallel Movement**

The Zapatistas were one of many resistances sparked by the ecological devastation, cultural degradation, and territorial dispossession that massive economic structural adjustments and “development” yielded (Holt-Giménez 2009; Holt-Gimenez and Patel 2012; Rosset, Martínez-Torres, and Hernández-Navarro 2005; Shattuck, Schiavoni, and VanGelder 2015). As neoliberal reforms ravaged rural economies throughout Latin America, the alliance of indigenous, peasant, fisherfolk and forest dweller organizations that make up *La Via Campesina* (LVC) organized to fight the “model of death”

perpetrated by a corporate food regime that devoured lands and displaced people (Desmarais and Nicholson 2013; McMichael 2009; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013a; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010). The Zapatistas are unaffiliated with *La Via Campesina*, however, both movements understand the exploitation of people and territory at the hands of transnational agribusiness, mining, fossil fuel development, and tourism as incompatible with life with dignity, or life at all.

By the time of the formation of the World Trade Organization in 1995, rural people everywhere were experiencing the loss of their livelihoods (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Patel 2009; Wittman 2011). As regional trade agreements inundated international markets with commodity grains from industrial agribusiness, and corporate land-grabs seized rural territories, indigenous and peasant people of the global south saw the corporate food regime as an all-out assault on their cultures (Desmarais and Nicholson 2013; Holt-Giménez 2009; Wittman 2011)). In response to this, at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, *La Via Campesina* refuted the idea of “food security,” which propped up the hegemonic rationale of the “efficiency” of agribusiness, and proposed its alternative — food sovereignty (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Patel 2009) .

According to *La Via Campesina's* declaration of Nyéléni, food sovereignty is “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (V Campesina 2007). It goes on to say, “Food sovereignty implies new social

relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations” (V Campesina 2007). In this way, food sovereignty is an ever- evolving dialogue and framework for justice. Similar to the world envisioned by the Zapatistas, the framework for food sovereignty denounces the hegemony of the current ontological order, and instead nurtures diversity and the flourishing of many ways of thinking and being. For the indigenous and peasant organizations of *La Via Campesina*, the practice and tool for building these new social relations (including those with the other-than-human) is agroecology (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013a).

As a practice that questions relationships of power and seeks equilibrium with nature, agroecology is more than a set of ecological prescriptions for agriculture. Unlike the model of industrial agriculture, where soils and slopes, weed management and water flows are homogenized (to the extent possible), agroecology is the science of adaptation, working within the natural limitations of an ecosystem, and living in reciprocity with the land (Francis et al. 2003; Gliessman, Friedmann, and Howard 2019). Intimately linking the continuity of cultural lifeways with principles that sustain the health of the Mother Earth, agroecology is the “peasant way” of LVC, reflecting the struggle to transform food systems and local economies through models of production which are nourished by ancestral cultural knowledge (Rosset et al. 2019; Snipstal 2015). In this practice of improving the health of their ecosystems and the strength of their local economies, rural (indigenous, peasant, fisher folk and forest dweller) communities

become the social carriers of agroecology (McCune et al. 2017; Van der Ploeg 2011). Their unique sociohistorical, political and cultural realities define the way that agroecological praxis articulates to fulfill collective priorities.

Over the decades of dialogue, the liberatory interpretation of agroecology within the Latin American Coordination of Rural Workers of *La Via Campesina* (CLOC-LVC), and in LVC as a whole, evolved into a critical theory that encompasses social and economic, as well as ecological dimensions (Van der Ploeg 2011). LVC's struggle for food sovereignty, akin to the Zapatista struggle, stands in fierce opposition to the neoliberal order. Given the enormity of the task at hand, the interrelated factors of both "scaling-out" (horizontal, through person-to-person) and "scaling-up" (vertical, through policy and institutions) agroecology are of vital interest to activists and scholars within the movement (Altieri and Nicholls 2012; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. 2018). While social movements must ultimately confront the structural systems and institutions (scaling-up) created to maintain the international trade agreements, predatory markets, and neo-colonial exploitation, this analysis looks at the internal processes and practices that movements employ to reproduce and expand their socio-cultural and political capacity to do so (scaling -out) (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. 2018). In order to "globalize the struggle"<sup>6</sup> and build the strength of this narrative, the indigenous and peasant organizations that make up LVC have vested their

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<sup>6</sup> "Globalize the Struggle! Globalize Hope!" is a common chant heard in LVC associated gatherings.



energies into some level of promotion amongst their members to scale out, or “territorialize,” the use of agroecology (Meek et al. 2019; Rosset et al. 2011).

Territorialization of agroecology, for the movements of LVC, implies the application of agroecological practices by increasing numbers of families across a larger and larger territory (McCune and Sánchez 2018). These rural social movements understand that, in order to continue to resist the malignant logic of growing exploitation, they must simultaneously advance a critical theory that directly challenges the structures of oppression (Rosset et al. 2019). Literature on efforts to scale-out agroecology compares the roles and efficacy of formal and informal practices in agroecology education and the evolution of philosophical and pedagogical principles that sustain them (Ferguson et al. 2019; McCune et al. 2017; McCune and Sánchez 2018; Rosset et al. 2019).

## **Formación**

The cultivation of decolonial thought, and the *formación* of self-assured, culturally fortified, and politically astute participants in social transformation cannot occur within the institutions of colonial domination. For these reasons, the Zapatistas and the organizations of *La Vía Campesina* all regard education among the highest priorities for the realization of the world that they are trying to construct. They recognize the importance of reversing the marginalization of rural youth in education, and are undertaking their own processes of liberatory education. Rural social movements understand that the struggle for cultures, for peasant agroecology, for food sovereignty,

and for autonomy depend on the counter-hegemonic *formación* of its youth to confront the destructive forces of the dominant regime. Embracing Che Guevara's use of the word for training or education, they use *formación* in the sense of shaping the individual for participation in the collective, as a member of a harmonious, egalitarian society (McCune et al. 2017).

As of 2014, over forty schools and training centers worldwide have been established by member organizations of LVC to nurture local knowledge, promote critical theory, encourage intergenerational dialogue and expand the reach of agroecology (McCune, Reardon, and Rosset 2014). These educational settings, whether formal or informal, are aimed at social transformation from the unique contexts of struggle of its youth — instilling values of justice, equality, humility, respect for nature, cooperative work, and encouragement of diversity (Muñoz et al. 2014). Though specific pedagogical practices in these educational spaces vary according to distinct socio historical and political factors, they merge the influences of Freirean critical pedagogy and popular education with the horizontal “peasant pedagogies” adapted from Mayan practices of mutual aid.<sup>7</sup>(Holt-Giménez 2006; McCune et al. 2014; McCune and Sánchez 2018; Rosset et al. 2019). Common among their tactics are inquiry-based learning, horizontal knowledge exchange between participants and facilitators, peer-to-peer or peasant-to-peasant

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<sup>7</sup> During the 1970's, Kaquikel Guatemalans established a methodology-cum-movement founded in the cultural principle of *kuchubal*, or mutual aid. This cross-pollination of ideas around improving soil quality, water conservation, crop yields and resilience became the basis for a movement referred to as *Movimiento Campesino-a-Campesino*. (Holt-Giménez 2006)

learning, and dialogue between ways of knowing, or *diálogo de saberes* (Rosset et al. 2019). These concepts form the foundation for what is an “epistemologically complex” task (McCune et al. 2017).

The vitality and effectiveness of strategies for the “scaling out,” or spreading of agroecology, then, are not only at the core of food sovereignty, but of indigenous autonomy, gender and racial justice, preservation of biodiversity, and amelioration of climate chaos. Understanding the ways in which agroecology “moves” is a critical focus for organizers and movement actors. In this vein, I choose to highlight common practices that reinforce horizontal pedagogies and root the movement of agroecology in local experience and knowledge. This paper considers these practices in the context of the work of a Northern NGO with autonomous indigenous communities of the Global South. From my limited vantage of the work of Schools for Chiapas, I envision its potential for growth in these areas, and what that might mean for its solidarity. Foundational to all these practices is that which is known in *La Via Campesina* as *diálogo de saberes*.

### **Diálogo de Saberes as the Basis for Decolonial Solidarity**

*Diálogo de Saberes*, or dialogue between ways of knowing, emerged from intercultural processes within *La Via Campesina* (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014; McCune et al. 2014). Robust debate in regional and international fora is essential for the organizations of LVC to articulate a unified vision across a diversity of landscapes and languages. Early

on, indigenous voices within the movement began to insist that other ways of knowing be weighed equally with the dominant western discourse in LVC fora (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014). As the movement seeks solutions to the daily injustices that rural people face, inquiry into and rectification of inequitable relationships of power within the movement itself becomes part of the process. Beyond mere questions of representation, the entire framing of a debate within the forum, “emergences” of epistemology and *cosmovisión* began to shape the nature of the conversations. This *diálogo de saberes* opens the floor for the profound diversity in conceptions of territory, rights, and property to emerge (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014). As a fundamental step in decolonizing global discourse, *diálogo de saberes* gives voice to the many meanings of what it is to be human.

The Zapatistas, themselves, are no strangers to facilitating this kind of exchange or *intercambio*. Immediately following their uprising, the *compañeros*<sup>8</sup>, *compañeras*, and *compañeros*, began hosting “intergalactic” encounters (in truth, they often feel that way), that is, international gatherings to share, discuss, and build collectivity across cultural differences (Starr et al. 2011). Marked by the earnest patience and inquisitiveness of the Zapatistas, these meetings become a space in which we all learn by following their example of walking while asking questions. Those of us from the outside observe their humility, graciousness, cooperation, and careful consideration as

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<sup>8</sup> The Zapatistas, despite their cultural-historical roots in Catholicism and traditional gender roles in indigenous communities, were quick to embrace gender-fluid and/or neutral pronouns.

they, in turn, observe and absorb the unique contributions from around the world. Gatherings like CompArte and Conciencia, convened to share art and science across cultural borders, demonstrate the Zapatistas' eagerness to participate in *intercambio*, to learn from the best of all cultures, while affirming the value of their Mayan heritage. Brilliantly moderating new ways of seeing and being, the Zapatistas navigate even the "strange things"<sup>9</sup> their visitors share with tolerance and grace.

Schools for Chiapas' relationship with the Zapatista communities, in its history as a solidarity organization over 23 years, could be said to be defined by a certain type of dialogue or *intercambio*. Acknowledging this of Schools for Chiapas' recent "edible forest" initiative, its founder, Peter Brown said, "It didn't all come from us, and it didn't all come from them." What began as a proposal for reforestation of one community finally metamorphosed into "edible forests" at 16 secondary schools throughout the zone. Whereas the original conception of the communities had been about "orchard trees," a more conventional perennial agricultural endeavor, the recovery of traditional practices struck a chord with members of the Education Committee. Ultimately, the idea for the project was a culmination of decades of work and extensive negotiation with the autonomous indigenous communities. This is how, even before the formation of the caracoles, Schools for Chiapas' agroecology education work began.

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<sup>9</sup> In a speech concluding the First International Encounter of Women in Struggle, in March of 2018, the *compañeras* Zapatistas thanked their guests for sharing their sport, music, dance, politics and strange things.

Given its origins, its reputation, and its depth of experience with Zapatista processes, Schools for Chiapas necessarily resides in the potential of this dialogue. Zapatista communities, and youth in particular, are eager to find resonance in the perspectives of others, and solidarity in global struggle. International sharing has always been an important part of the Zapatista's movement. The autonomous communities encourage and value the contributions of those from outside of their milieu, albeit through specific, and tightly-controlled avenues. The *intercambio* or *diálogo* facilitates the novelty that Schools for Chiapas brings to the relationship by contextualizing it within vital local knowledge. In the case of the food forest initiative, dialogue emphasizes the experience of the youth and brings this knowledge to the fore.

Local knowledge belongs in the "front seat" of any agroecological process (McCune et al. 2014; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). Through a dozen or more workshops over the last four years, SfC had intentions of sharing concepts of forest agriculture. Agroecological praxis, though, must be place-based. Despite motivations to bring something "different than school gardens" (which Brown said the communities expressed explicitly) to the students, the concepts must take root in a particular territory with its own soil and climate conditions, and its own social dynamics and history. These relationships are at the core of agroecology. So, while negotiation about the logistics of food forests took place at the level of the *Junta*, and even *intercambio*, or mutual exchange of vision, with select members of the Education Committee of Morelia, the process of *diálogo de saberes* with the youth and communities themselves, is vital to

the adoption and implementation of practices that are ecologically, socially and culturally relevant. The wisdom of social movement practices in agroecology education offers guidance for the future efforts of Schools for Chiapas' solidarity and support of the construction of Zapatista autonomy.

### **Looking to Local Models**

The Zapatista struggle for autonomy is a fight for their livelihoods, their right to self-determination, and the continuity of their cultural ways of knowing and being. For the Zapatistas, and for the movements of *La Via Campesina*, agroecology plays a critical role in sustaining their movements and defending territories from neoliberal exploitation (Rosset et al. 2019; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013a). On a larger scale, though, "it is the only path for survival that sustains complete populations and ecosystems." (Personal Communication, March 2019) This struggle is vital for all of us. For this reason, LVC movement organizers acknowledge the important role of education in "scaling-out" agroecology across territories.

Over the past twenty-three years, Schools for Chiapas has followed the ever-evolving forms and priorities of Zapatista autonomy in solidarity. While SfC's role as an outside organization is not central to the movement, the recent food forest initiative (FFI) is an example of an attempt to "scale-out" agroecology through education. In order to reflect on and evaluate the (FFI), I draw on the literature around the scaling out of agroecology. In addition to this context, my analysis also draws from two conversations with

participants in Chiapas organizations whose work involves scaling out agroecology and the processes of agroecology education.

First, DESMI A.C., the Civil Association for the Economic and Social Development of Indigenous Mexicans, evolved out of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in support of indigenous communitarian processes in defense of Mother Earth. Their work in agroecology, solidarity economies, and ethnoveterinary practices accompanies indigenous communities in their pursuit of food sovereignty and autonomy. In October of 2019, DESMI celebrated its 50th year of accompaniment of indigenous communities in their struggle for land and territory and cultural autonomy. DESMI works exclusively with communities who are aligned with the EZLN.

LabVida, or “Laboratories for Life” is a program, funded out of the College of the Southern Border (ECOSUR) that trained teachers in the planning and use of school gardens as both curriculum and classroom. Agroecology was one of five axes of training. Researchers started LabVida as a certificate program for official teachers, later integrating educators from other settings such as NGO’s. Despite the ending of LabVida’s initial funding cycle, its work lives on in an organically-organized network of school gardens, or *RedHuertos*, in which educators from all settings convene to share techniques, activities, and curriculum with one another. My contacts with these organizations enhanced my understanding of the critical themes of agroecology and pedagogical practice in the context of the political and social terrain in Chiapas.



As we shall see, the agroecologist at DESMI contextualizes the significance of agroecology in the region as a highly political practice. LabVida expresses common pedagogical principles and practices of agroecological *formación* to those of *La Via Campesina*. The LabVida team, in documenting their experience, albeit in settings distinct from Zapatista schools, provides local Chiapas lessons which have both socio-historical and ecological relevance to the autonomous communities in resistance.

## Chapter Three: Evaluating the Food Forest

In this chapter, I describe the negotiations between Schools for Chiapas and the Zapatista Education Committee of Morelia in establishing the food forest initiative and its goals. I then analyze the FFI informed by: my interviews with Peter Brown; my observations and notes from the planning and execution of a food forest workshop that I attended; conversations with staff and volunteers of SfC; and observations and conversations in other excursions with SfC. Though my experiences reflect a very limited perspective, they have allowed insight into some of the challenges and potentials of the project. In considering the work of SfC in agroecology education, I then explore observations and ideas for advancement in light of informal interviews with two people working locally in agroecology education endeavors, DESMI and LabVida.

### **“It didn’t all come from us”: Negotiating the Food Forests**

To anyone who thinks critically about intercultural communications and power dynamics, the projects of Northern non-governmental organizations in marginalized communities raise proverbial red flags. The Zapatistas are keenly aware of the insidiousness of colonialism’s hegemonic ways, and therefore, have eliminated associations with organizations that cross any lines. Still my curiosity bore this skepticism, and one of my first questions about the food forest initiative was “where did the idea originate? How did it come about? What were its goals? That is where my conversations with Peter Brown began.

Schools for Chiapas' solidarity with the Zapatista communities, led by Peter Brown, evolved in response to campaigns by the EZLN itself, but also in relation to important global environmental and food sovereignty struggles happening at that same time. For instance, resistance to GMO's in Zapatista territory and SfC's accompaniment in development of seed banks led to connections with the highly visible struggle against biopiracy in the patenting of the neem tree. This led to planting neem trees, which led to planting *ramón* trees, which led to constructing nurseries, and so on. Throughout these many developments, Brown learned the ropes in negotiating his ideas with structures of Zapatista autonomy, and in Peter Brown's words, getting "pretty sophisticated at understanding the process."

When paramilitaries attacked and deforested a community in the *caracol* of Morelia in the spring of 2014, SfC proposed a campaign of reforestation to the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, or Council of Good Government. Just three months later, though, the brutal assassination of an educator in the *caracol* of *La Realidad* put all of Zapatista territory on high alert and the idea of reforestation on hold. These threats to the security and autonomy of the communities placed new emphasis on the availability and diversity of food sources. In response to the evolving situation, Brown came up with the idea of reforesting with food plants, as a way to diversify nutrition while re-planting trees. In addition to more familiar fruit-bearing trees, SfC proposed that a "food forest" would produce nuts, tubers, medicines, forage for animals, and renewable sources of firewood.

Perennial polycultures that integrate areas of annual cultivation have a rich history throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeological studies of land-use patterns in the region reveal the precise management of forest succession for the cultivation of forest gardens amongst the ancestors of contemporary Mayan communities (Ford and Nigh 2016). Complex polyculture agroforestry systems, like these food forests, are common to tropical regions globally. As evidenced by 8000 years of Mayan habitation, they are considered to be the most resilient agroecosystems (Ford and Nigh 2016). In my conversation with the agroecologist at DESMI, he shared this:

the secret of why the communities feel safe in the mountains is because there are trees that produce food, which are not recognized. They are not commercial food, but they are local foods that guarantee subsistence...that is why there is a great prevalence of Mayan communities, because it was very difficult for the colonizers to exterminate the Mayan communities here. Because they had a good ecosystem insertion.

In contemporary Chiapas, species from the forests are still utilized as important foodstuffs. Women's kitchen gardens remain as traces of more full-scale forest gardens. According to Brown, these gardens are the present-day model for the food forests. Inspired by the sustainability and productivity of traditional Mayan agroforestry milpa practices, and the continued tradition of *solares*, or kitchen gardens, the idea of a food system that supports ecosystems and biodiversity appealed to both Brown and members of the Education Committee of Morelia.

Despite the fact that the food forests were modeled on agricultural practices of women, with the diversification of food and medicine, I also point out, as Peter Brown did, that the FFI was very much negotiated amongst men. He said that the Education Committee was quite sold on the idea of the food forests, but then added the caveat that it was a “very male-bonded group... that spends an inordinate amount of time hanging out with each other thinking about education.” This remains a topic to be explored in the future.

Though SfC proposed its original idea in mid-spring of 2014, Brown told me that the Education Committee of Morelia “really created the project.... That is, the beginning. I mean, they set it all up.” Charged with the responsibility of agroecology education, the *Comité* heard of the initial proposal, and spearheaded dialogue with the communities themselves, and with Schools for Chiapas, in order to find it a home in the secondary schools (ESRAZ). According to Brown, the *Comité* “decided that the food forest was at the core of their ecological agricultural educational [sic] program, because in the communities, the general assembly of the *caracol* has said that they want something more than just *milpas*.”<sup>10</sup> The communities explicitly wanted something different from what the students would learn at home. Finally, after many months of consultations, the *Junta* agreed to the idea under the condition that Schools for Chiapas establish one in each of the sixteen secondary schools in the zone. Though the idea of SfC was to build one food forest for the whole *caracol*, they would be at all the schools, or nowhere.

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<sup>10</sup> *Milpa*, in this context, means the traditional plantings of corn, beans and squash.

Once the initiative was approved, SfC worked closely with the *Comité*, developing the “edible forests” project over its four years of implementation. The food forest sites at each of the ESRAZ schools were to be incorporated into the areas that the schools had for production of *milpa*. Delegate students and educators from each school would attend three or four- day workshops, three or four times a year. Upon their arrival back to the schools (often carrying with them a crate of new plants), the students were expected to share the information from the workshop with their peers. This coordination was no small feat. Between the directors’ comings and goings from the U.S. and the volatile circumstances in Zapatista territory, they hashed out logistics of workshop times and locations, managing to discuss some content before and after each workshop. In these ways, the initiative did evolve out of a collaborative effort —and without a doubt, the *Comité* “put themselves way out with this project.”

## **The Workshop**

In February of 2018, during a volunteer internship with Schools for Chiapas, I had the opportunity to participate in my first and only food forest workshop. I recount this experience here in order to give a sense of the planning, content and delivery of the information within a food forest workshop. Where possible, I include information that I gleaned from other participants, to more fully understand what the project looked like, and the scope of potential for future initiatives.

Schools for Chiapas began its first food forest workshops in 2015. It took several workshops to accommodate, including several changes to configuration and location. But over time, SfC established a workable routine comfortable enough that last-minute arrivals of facilitators and fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants planning.<sup>11</sup> While I only experienced one workshop, I could see how each new season and scenario brought its own unique hurdles.

I arrived in San Cristóbal de las Casas one week prior to the workshop, to meet Peter and Susan just a couple days later. At the time, they informed me that the nursery manager had had a severe stroke, which significantly changed the plans they had made for my internship. Despite the shock, and in the midst of trying to rearrange the daily operations, we scrambled to get ready for the workshop as planned. We discussed a loose agenda, set aside the plants we would take with us, and waited for Alejandro, a long-time collaborator, to arrive. He flew in after an all-night, bus/plane ride, we wheeled around town picking up last-minute supplies for his nutrition segment, and with no further discussion of the workshop, we were on the road. My own lack of clarity on how the workshop might flow was disorienting, but the disorder was understandable. Another volunteer who attended two workshops the following fall said that there had been better developed agendas for each of them. Similar to my

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<sup>11</sup> With all of the variables involved, being inflexible in one's planning is a recipe for frustration, and even failure. Over several visits to Chiapas, I have come to learn that "expect the unexpected" is the mantra for maintaining a good attitude, and for maintaining forward momentum.

experience, though, she witnessed no collective planning prior to the SfC team's arrival at the workshop site.

Due to preparations that were happening for the first International Gathering of Women in Struggle in the *caracol* of Morelia, the workshop took place in a community situated on a "recuperated" cattle operation, where there was ample infrastructure for the participants' lodging and a sprawling food forest site. That evening we met with four members of the Education Committee in the store-room that was our sleeping quarters. In addition to discussing the security concerns that had arisen in the community, we established the starting and meal times for the weekend. The workshop would be short — just two full days, and another morning until *almuerzo*, the morning meal at 11. We discussed classroom time and field time. We would not be in the food forest itself until the second day. The Education Committee offered logistical support for our meal plans, but there was no discussion of the content of the workshop. They were preoccupied with threats and encroachment of a neighboring community.

At seven the next morning, we were barely awake when the youth started to convene in the classroom area, an open-air assembly space. The *Comité* members chatted outside the doorway of our quarters awaiting the plan. We all spent several minutes flipping benches and establishing a wall for sheets of butcher paper to write on. The young women packed themselves on the right side of the room and the young men on the left, most of them shyly looking up from downcast gaze, sometimes whispering to one



another in one of three languages, and sitting as far from the front of the room as possible. Peter began with a “*Buenos días*” and welcome, launching the workshop with a question to the group about the benefits of “edible forest” agriculture. When no one offered an answer, Peter threw out some examples before one of the educators tentatively chimed in. At that point, the scribbles on the butcher paper began, with the students diligently taking notes in their notebooks — living fences, erosion control, green manures. After coffee that morning, students and educators broke into their school groups, to report out on which techniques they had employed in their food forests. The educators, for the most part, reported out for their groups.

Alejandro’s section in the afternoon was a dynamic and interactive activity. The girls and boys broke into two groups each, drawing the outline of a human body on paper. We walked through a series of questions about what we, as humans find to be sources of strength, what we value, what nourishes us, and alternatively, what behaviors and physical factors threaten our bodies and our communities. The activity got the students moving and sharing quite a bit more, breaking down barriers, laughing about the shape of the figure on the paper, and thinking about their lives. The group of young women with whom I was seated debated causes of health problems in their communities. One young woman pointed out that stress was very common disease factor for women. The report-outs this time were giggly and silly, a sign of greater ease, in my estimation. Beyond that though, each group presented their “body” with unique and thoughtful reflection. The exercise touched an experience that was real to them.

Well-versed in nutrition and herbal medicine, Alejandro taught a section on the rainbow of foods and finding a balance of the five flavors. During the sessions Peter taught,



ESRAZ students in a food forest workshop watering new additions.

Alejandro slipped away to prepare some unique additions to the meals of beans and tortillas -- a spicy peanut sauce and a sauté of hibiscus flowers. I thought it strange that several of these foods were not among the plants that we were sharing with them. I intended my own contribution of a chimichurri sauce to correspond to the introduction of parsley (which we

had brought) as a medicinal food. Space did not allow the participation of youth in the preparation of the recipes, though, and we did not harvest the plants. The extent of their engagement, in this aspect, was in tasting the food. As teenagers are wont to do, they looked skeptical and giggled amongst themselves, but after making a show of their reluctance, sampled some. The members of the *Comité*, being more adventurous, helped themselves to extra.

The second day of the workshop, we spent the morning going over properties of the plants that we had brought with us. Cesar, the son of the nursery manager arrived in a tiny hatchback with a load of bougainvillea that he had purchased from a nursery on the way out of town. After *almuerzo*, we would finally go into the food forest plot. Damaris, a 16-year-old from the school in the community gave us a tour of all the plants that they had established in their food forest. The sprawling tract of land had wet areas, slopes, zones that were verdant and others that were lacking. Peter pointed out examples of some of the agroecology principles in practice, and the assortment of food that was available. Damaris showed us interspersed plantings of corn and beans, and directed all of us as to where the new plants would go. We gathered around as a couple of young



An Education promoter assesses a vetiver plant before dividing it with his

men worked at digging out a mother vetiver plant to divide. The cuttings would be planted on the slope to prevent erosion. Cuttings of *chaya*, a woody shrub, would be planted tightly at the perimeter to prevent the entry of animals. The youth broke up into elective teams, with facilitators and educators leading the charge. Three young women attempted to evade the labor by slinking into a corner.

That afternoon, after introducing the medicinal qualities of yarrow and parsley, I prepared the chimichurri sauce in a blender in our room. Cesar, a medical student, introduced a section on treating hemorrhoids. His limited medical experience had taught him that this was a prominent problem in the communities. Despite Cesar's pedantic tone and Power Point, the youth were surprisingly attentive to the relevance of the material he presented, taking notes while the educators asked questions. These nuggets of information were clearly valuable to them and to people who they knew.

The following morning was our last session in the workshop, in which each school got together to make lists of the plants they wanted to take with them on the journey home. In addition, Peter took orders for some of the larger fruit and nut trees, which SfC would deliver once the rainy



season began. I gathered up the lists, each scribed with perfect lettering. Peter's pitch for macadamia had clearly caught their attention, as had some of the flashier fruit trees. The youth then divided up the plants that we brought to carry with them on their journey home. I was surprised that no collective evaluation of the workshop was held. It

seemed to me that we had missed an opportunity, not only for constructive feedback, but more importantly, for the dialogue that is so vital to co-generation of knowledge and solidarity.

## **Materials, Facilitation, and Evaluation**

Along with the plants, we arrived to the workshop with a few pages of materials that we brought for each school. Volunteers, including myself, had struggled to prepare information on many of the plants with the scientific name, its climate range, its uses, and some planting and care instructions. Months later, however, it came to my attention how inadequate the information was. Researched by people who neither knew the climates or the plants well, and many whose Spanish vocabulary was insufficient, the pages were full of information that was lacking in practical relevance, in language that was challenging for indigenous students. In particular, one facilitator/farmer reported back that the students did not use the book. His suggestion was to look at plants through the eyes of a *campesino*, to think about what a farmer would need to know about a plant that she/he was wanting to grow. Given that the information that we provided was only marginally useful, the students were left to their own notes and experience in taking care of the plants.

Aside from Brown, most other facilitators for the workshops came from Veracruz. They are volunteers who have developed a relationship with Schools for Chiapas over the years, and make the journey to offer what they can to the process. Their diverse

interests/expertise in topics of agroecology, food, and medicine brought them into contact with the organization's work. Several had been involved with previous SfC endeavors, including bee-keeping workshops and the like. They represent a variety of knowledge sets — some farmers, some healers, or as Peter Brown said, “Farmers, bakers and candlestick makers.” This diversity of approaches has potential for engaging agroecology from a variety of angles. As Merce, of LabVida, shared with me, one of the things that they “discovered with the teachers was that agroecology could open pathways to teaching many things, and the reverse, that there are many things that you can take to agroecology and learn them from there.” In this way, the passions and talents of its volunteers bring great potential for the knowledge and novelty that Schools for Chiapas might share.

Each workshop presented its own unique circumstances, to which facilitators had to respond. Styles varied accordingly, but assimilation of new information depends heavily on the skill of the facilitator. I was surprised by my own and others' observations of lecture or “banking” style education, in which students passively receive the information from the teacher (Rosset et al. 2019). Though the students were respectful and attentive, this style of facilitation did not encourage active participation of the students. Contrary to this, another facilitator who attended the final two workshops, shared quite the opposite observation. She described a methodology that started with student knowledge, was expanded upon, and then collectively reflected upon. Given these two divergent experiences, I gather that not only were the skills of individual facilitators

variable, but also that activity planning and student engagement may have evolved with each workshop. Facilitators also shared with me activities that had been successful in drawing out the student's experiences and understanding. One was a role reversal in which the students were encouraged to teach from their own knowledge and notes about garlic while the facilitator asked both serious and silly questions. Another involved the creation of scale cut-outs of the plants that the youth then arranged in a 3-D mockup of their food forest. According to Brown and another volunteer in attendance, this activity was unanimously popular, and extremely effective in conceptualizing the mapping of a food forest.

According to my own observation and a conversation that I had with another participant, an evaluation had taken place in the final workshop, but was not necessarily a regular practice. I asked Brown about the input of the *Comité* on the workshop content and presentation. He told me, "Like all Zapatista processes, they're extremely reticent to be directive. They're very respectful of autonomy and they don't want to impose their ideas on us." As food forests at the ESRAZ schools were intended to be conduits for agroecological information, however, a collaborative planning of the workshops would have been beneficial. The place-based knowledge that students bring seems essential to any agroecological endeavor. At the point that the FFI ended, it seems that youth participation in planning was incipient. According to one participant in the evaluation, the students requested that they receive the proposed agenda in advance of the next workshop, ostensibly so that they might make suggestions or

changes. Having grown up in schools where education was a collective experience, and each student's contribution is valued, the youth naturally wanted participation in the structure of the intensive. Unfortunately, there were no more opportunities.

## **Evaluating the Challenges**

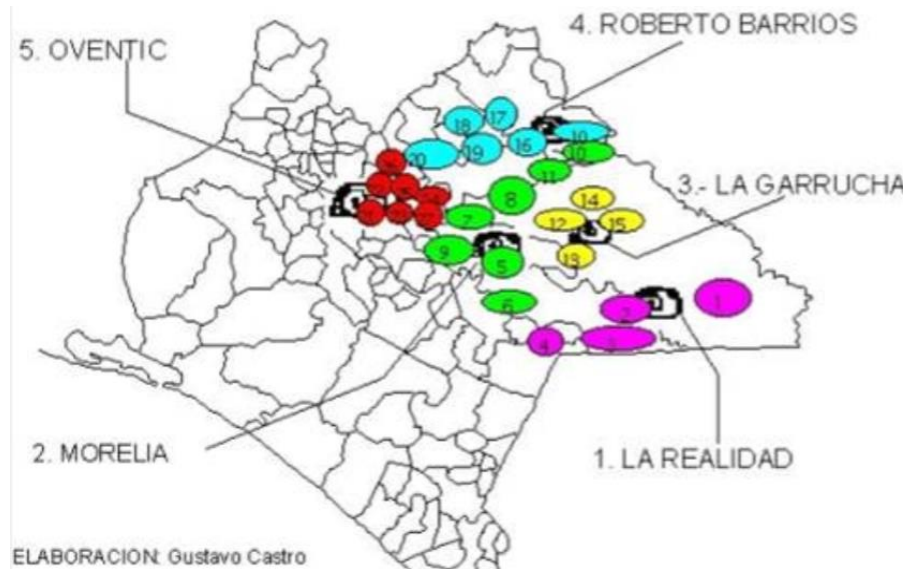
Either due to internal changes in the EZLN, the limitations posed by the project logistics, and/or the limitations of SfC execution, the food forest initiative ended in early September 2019. Despite the apparent enthusiasm, idealism and the investment of time and energy by the *Comité*, for reasons unknown to Schools for Chiapas, the *Comité* informed them that while they were encouraged to create another proposal, the FFI workshops would not continue. At this time, reflection on the challenges that the FFI faced offer lessons as to its limitations, but also opportunities for improvement, particularly as SfC considers a new proposal to the *Junta*.

One of the key themes that emerged from my extensive conversations with Peter Brown, and follow up conversations with Susan Beattie, were the challenges that the FFI faced. In this section, I discuss these various layers of challenges. While the intricate dance of details eventually developed somewhat of a rhythm, execution of each workshop was a true accomplishment. To begin with, Brown and his partner, Susan, negotiated many of the details of the training workshops from a distance, or, when they arrived in Chiapas just a few days prior to the date that was set months before.

Secondly, the food forests required a continuous supply of plants to deliver to the



schools at the time of the workshops, and also during the rainy season. The coordinators arranged to build a nursery with two small greenhouses to grow the plants, and hired a two-person staff to maintain the plantings in the courtyard area of its shared office in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Third, holding workshops meant coordinating transportation for delegate students and educators from any number of 16 ESRAZ schools (30 or more) and at least two members of the Education Committee of Morelia. Some arrived from distances as far away as eight hours on the precarious jungle roads, pulling educators from the schools, and members of the *Comité* from their work in the *caracol*. Fourth, once the location and time for each workshop was set with the Education Committee, Schools for Chiapas arranged for other facilitators to travel to Chiapas. Many came from Veracruz, which takes a minimum of 12 hours. Finally, the community that hosted the workshop was obligated to prepare meals and provide lodging, which was often in short supply, depending on the availability of community rooms or school space. Between coordination of travel for all, and schedules of the various parties, each workshop juggled many variables.



**The circles represent the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities of each *caracol*. (Schools for Chiapas, N.d.)**

Still other factors complicated the presentation of information in the workshops. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, each of the Zapatista *caracoles* make decisions about priorities in their zone that affect the development of their autonomy. Morelia, being the most geographically and linguistically disparate of the *caracoles* (with three different climate zones and three different Mayan languages), chose to place the secondary schools in locations that would accommodate the students' travel to and from home. Though SfC and the *Comité* organized early workshops by climate, concentrating three or four schools at a time, that strategy proved untenable either for space requirements, or inconvenience to members of the *Comité*. After several different configurations, the *Comité* decided that the simplest solution was for the students and

educators to arrive at the *caracol* itself, where they themselves convened. This had a number of implications for the workshop content and presentation, notably:

- Because the *caracol* itself did not have a food forest, additional travel to the nearest school had to be organized to facilitate the hands-on work (praxis) that is so critical to agroecology education. This limited the amount of time that the participants spent in the field.
- Given that Spanish was the language bridge amongst the students themselves, as well as between students and facilitators, there were few opportunities to encourage the use of their maternal languages and sharing from critical ways of knowing.
- The burden of transportation meant that only a handful of students could attend the workshop, which meant that the implementation of the food forests, and the responsibility for sharing information fell to the delegate students and educators upon returning home. Brown shared that the idea was that participants would become promoters in their schools, and also to their home communities.
- Most of the schools did not receive the support of group process and labor in addressing the unique ecological circumstances of their food forest parcel. Aside from the delivery of plants that happened during the rainy season, SfC staff did not visit those sites.
- Much of the information in the workshop had to be generalized to accommodate the diversity of climates, which meant that discussion of attributes and uses of specific plants was not relevant to all of the attending students.

Though the solution of convening all of the schools may have been the only option, my conversations with Brown and others involved indicated that without the process of practice and reflection, this “distance learning” proved challenging for participants to assimilate and retain information. There were field days or hands-on practice, but each ecosystem and territory present unique problems to solve. Because opportunities for praxis with their learning community were months apart, the educators and students implemented their food forest parcels with little follow-up the notes they had in hand. Further local support would have needed to come from the community itself, as there was no Agroecology Committee in the zone.

Yet another layer of challenges, according to Brown, lay with the nature and structure of the ESRAZ schools themselves. As boarding schools, students stay for a period of four weeks, before returning home for two. For the parents in these communities, Brown told me that attending secondary school is considered “almost like joining the army, or going off to the university.” The students’ ages range from 14 to 17, but the educator of the school is often no more than three years older. The schools, as a collective of students, are expected to be self-sufficient. They grow<sup>12</sup> and cook their own food, organize the tasks of cleaning and maintenance, work out and play sports and plan their schedule amongst themselves. This self-sufficiency means that, for the most part, the

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<sup>12</sup> In one of several visits to the countryside, I wrote in my journal, “The students prepared the milpa today. As I looked out across the hillside, I could see them coming. Almost in formation, systematically working the soil with pick mattocks, one behind the other, they dug the holes where the corn and beans would go.” - March 2018

community has little to do with the ESRAZ schools, specifically. Whereas primary schools are of the specific community in which they are located, the ESRAZ are regional.

Unlike in the Zapatista primary school where the communities are intimately involved in the curriculum and the development of the educator, the secondaries “are modeled on a military training camp” and emphasize learning that is different than what they get at home. This may be counter to garnering local knowledge from the school community, or engaging students’ home communities about the food forests. Alternation between school time and community time in CLOC-LVC and LVC agroecology schools allows the theories and practices learned at the school to be enacted in the home community, and conversely, encourages student knowledge as a foundation for learning. However, Peter Brown did not feel that this was done particularly well in the ESRAZ schools. Speaking of the Zapatista Education System (SERAZ), Brown told me, “the pedagogies they have are not particularly good at intergenerational sharing with the communities.” Whether it is that, or the amount of time that lapses between workshops and the students’ returns home, the hope that the students would be a liaison for the information “has been a relative bust.” The accuracy of this statement would be difficult to tell in such a short period of time; but I gathered that progress along those lines had not gone according to plan.

During the breaks from school, food forest parcels were mostly left unattended, as even local students and educators had other responsibilities. As Brown described it, the

isolation of the ESRAZ schools was one of the biggest challenges that the food forests faced. The schools are located on collective territory under the jurisdiction of the *caracol*. Therefore, for individual families, or even the community as a whole, to benefit from the efforts put into the food forest, would unduly advantage that community over others in the area. The adherence to this principle meant that, in the community where the food forest was more regularly cared for by Peter and Susan, citrus fell from the trees, unharvested.

Perspectives from within the communities of the *Comité* and the ESRAZ youth were not accessible to me. The voices of the Zapatistas are notably absent in this reflection on the food forests. Many of the challenges I share here are simply factual. Others, though of critical importance to the assessment, represent only the perspectives of Peter Brown and Susan Beattie. Brown, as the principal actor in all of the negotiations with the *Comité*, has been my primary informant on Schools for Chiapas. My own narrow experience and limited scope bear on this assessment. The political-economic realities, social obligations, cultural norms and generational concerns within the communities, addressed by several people that I spoke with, however, do add other layers of complexity to the picture.

## **Real World Challenges**

Over the course of my conversations with SfC staff and volunteers, the Zapatista communities were in a process of reflection and reconfiguration in their own

organization. As mentioned earlier, the food forest workshop scheduled for 2019 was cancelled amidst heightened tensions and militarization by the federal army throughout the region. Facing grave security problems and violence, and concerned for the safety of outsiders in their territory, one Zapatista leader explained the need to close ranks. The Zapatista leadership and bases of support, began convening and forming a consensus about how it was that they were going to break the siege<sup>13</sup> and strengthen their communities.

Apart from the difficulties that came with convening the workshops and teaching the material, every conversation that I had was premised on everyday challenges to the survival of indigenous communities. The challenges in particular affect the Zapatistas. Counter to the campaign rhetoric of the incoming president, since the election of the “leftist” administration of Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2018, Zapatistas and their allies in the National Indigenous Congress are experiencing escalations of violence at the hands of military and paramilitary forces alike. In addition, social programs instigated under the new administration target marginalized communities for assimilation. Extractive industries, export agribusiness and positions in the newly created National Guard all tear at the communal fabric of indigenous organization. Zapatistas and their supporters denounce these programs of the “good overseer.”<sup>14</sup> They understand them

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<sup>13</sup> In a communiqué dated August 17th, 2019 the Indigenous Command of the Revolutionary Clandestine Committee, announced an impressive expansion of Zapatista-controlled territories and the formation of seven new *caracoles*, or centers of resistance (CRAREZ).

<sup>14</sup> In a three-part communiqué, SubComandante Moisés y SubComandante Galeano denounce the administration of Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador as simply a “new overseer” in the slavery system of

as tactics intended to bring autonomous communities under submission, sweeping them into a homogeneous consumer society and destroying their right to self-determination. Zapatistas, by their definition of autonomy, do not take any state support. However, in conversation around San Cristóbal, I learned that families are being enticed away from their commitment to Zapatismo, and that social disruption within and around the autonomous communities poses serious threats.

The staff of the SfC nursery, Rosa, who is Tseltal, and Socrates, who is Tzotzil, both referred to the effects of government social programs of those that they know. When talking to Rosa about her own community, she shared that one challenge of getting people interested in food forests, was that “people no longer wanted to work. No, they just wait for the day that they charge their subsidy...It’s easier to receive money, go and buy your corn, and now, better to not even sow corn. There are many families that are like this now.” In particular, they noticed the threat that these state programs pose to local knowledge. As people become accustomed to a consumer lifestyle, their knowledge of planting cycles, the uses of medicinal plants, and the retention of tradition are all at risk of being lost. “So, yes, capitalism has affected them [the communities] a lot,” she told me.

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capitalism, that is lauded for being good, because he is nicer, when in effect, the rhetoric he uses is just a tool to continue to perpetuate the system.



Though Rosa felt that the idea of the food forest encompassed many good ideas, from growing medicine to addressing global warming, she also expressed pragmatic reasons why prioritizing a food forest might be difficult for the communities. Families, she said, faced daily challenges of transportation and communication, and already have their ways of surviving. They have enough work, she explained, “So it’s complicated for a person or a community to adapt to this kind of planting. If they saw the results of the planting, maybe they would be motivated, but if it’s purely talk and talk and talk, and only that, they won’t be convinced.” Similarly, Brown acknowledged the need for the food forests to have some practical successes, as a complement to *milpa*. As there were no local models, though, the concept of a food forest was challenging to demonstrate. While they “like the idea of respecting Mother Earth, and taking that approach,” he said, “they are kind of like real people trying to make a living.”

Making a living is only getting harder. Changing precipitation patterns and the drying of springs and wells threaten Zapatista autonomy in very serious ways. In one community that we visited, three of five springs have run dry in the past 10 years. I spoke with people in different communities who told me that each year, they wait later and later for the rains to come in order to plant their corn. Many families are forced to supplement their income to feed themselves. Members of Zapatista families must sometimes take seasonal employment in Mexico City and Cancún to make up for insufficient food, which is both challenging for their collective commitments and their relationships. Before I understood this reality fully, I asked an elder of the community

about what they thought of the food forests. The man replied with a look of genuine concern in his eyes. “I think it’s a good idea, but the problem is water.” As we crossed the hillside to a ravine by his house, we sought out the coolest soil to harbor a seedling sweetgum tree (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) until it rained. For a food forest to become a factor in climate resilience, the plants have to survive first.

## **Outcomes and Opportunities**

As I write, the staff of the nursery accompanies members of the Education Committee with the final deliveries of plants to the schools. They report that, in some sites, only the toughest plants (the most drought tolerant) have survived. On the other hand, there are some that, for the conditions of the soil, or relative abundance of water, or the green thumbs and interest of the students, will thrive. Zapatistas, including the youth, are famously hard-working. In spite of the fact that efforts may seem disproportionate to the yield, they most certainly have not been fruitless.

Though Brown acknowledged the need for the FFI to have more practical successes, he reported, “individual schools or promoters and so forth that are having successes with one or the other part.” He added that in encouraging students to talk amongst themselves about their experiences, he noticed that “while it [was] still very incipient, very new, there is ownership. And with ownership comes knowledge.”

In March of 2018, I joined Schools for Chiapas on an unrelated adventure in which we visited one of the ESRAZ food forests. After our day of painting a mural on a new school building, Rudi, a smiling 13-year-old, proudly showed us the plot where they had planted macadamia, lemon, yarrow, taro, lemongrass and many, many other edible and medicinal plants. There was no pump in the community, and the students had diligently hauled water in buckets from 450 m or more to maintain what appeared to be perfectly happy plants. We were humbled by what we saw.

These plants, along with the youth who tend them, will mature and become part of an evolving landscape. They will provide shade, nourish the soil, offer delicious fruits, roots and greens, heal fevers, and become forage. The people who care for them and watch them grow will learn their uses and how to propagate them. Others from the community will plant cuttings and sow seeds. Flowers will attract new pollinators. Mycelium will repopulate the soil. Animals will return to the degraded lands that the Zapatistas occupied twenty-six years ago. The seeds that were planted in the experiences of the youth will find fertile soil in their lives beyond the school. This is the hope for the food forests like the one above.

One thing that we couldn't help but notice though, about the food forest at Rudi's school, was that the trees and medicinal plants alike had been planted three feet apart, in perfect rows like an orchard. Explanations of multi-story polyculture had not made sense to them. I can only surmise from my limited observations that there had been

little hands-on praxis, and that the information was not grounded in something that they knew or could see. Leaving the “classroom,” there had been no opportunity to ask questions, compare observations, or share challenges. And while students had succeeded in nurturing the plants, follow-up was needed. That moment, a learning opportunity for all of us, alluded to so many more.

These experiences of my time with Schools for Chiapas in the spring of 2018 were the primary impetus for the initial research question guiding this paper. Having been invited into the organization to assist with its transition, I wanted to do an evaluation, of sorts, of the FFI. I wanted to hear from the youth in the ESRAZ schools what their priorities were, how they proposed that the workshops be structured, what aspects of the food forests most interested them, and how they saw the initiative contributing to their autonomy. From an early age, their education in the SERAZ and their respective roles in their communities prepares them for critical examination of the situations that they face, and for the collective creation of solutions. Their active participation is vital to the initiation of any agroecology process in Zapatista territory. This proposal remains to be enacted, but if Schools for Chiapas is to continue in agroecology education with the Zapatista schools, it will be essential.

## **Models and Mentors**

As the prospects for my research stalled, and were ultimately re-routed, my question, while still evaluative, also morphed. I turned to other organizations and projects

working in agroecology education to ask. What are the best practices of an outsider working to scale-out practices of agroecology in indigenous communities? What is your advice for providing valuable support in this realm? Should Schools for Chiapas attempt something similar, how might we do it differently?

Due to politically precarious relationships in San Cristóbal, convoluted allegiances, and complicated histories, I did not stray far from those who I knew to be *compas*, people who are sympathetic to, and politically aligned with the Zapatistas. Both of these interviewees are trusted comrades whose concern for the well-being of the communities is paramount. Their supportive insights and reflections are founded in a depth of discourse and experience in agroecology that spans from early in Zapatista autonomy to the present. Given the distinct nature of their work, and of our conversations, I will discuss them separately.

### **LabVida**

Instigated by researchers in Agroecology at the College of the Southern Border, ECOSUR, LabVida is an educational initiative specifically aimed at the scaling of agroecology in Chiapas, through the mechanism of teaching teachers. LabVida's diploma program started as a pilot at two participating schools, became a teacher training first for official teachers, and later, included anyone doing education in agroecology, be they from NGO's, public programs, or schools. The diploma program, which took place over the course of ten months, instructed teachers in the implementation and use of school

gardens as a pedagogical tool, and as a classroom. When I spoke with Merce, a coordinator and administrator at LabVida, she was in the process of compiling a manual of the experiences of the LabVida team about the school garden program.

The circumstances of the teachers within LabVida's program are distinct from Schools for Chiapas' facilitators with the ESRAZ of Morelia, however, there are congruences, and therefore, lessons to be gleaned. Both the teachers in LabVida's program and the facilitators in Schools for Chiapas are in similar positions of being outsiders entering into a new community/school environment and trying to engage students with new concepts. Both are trying to connect agroecology to various aspects in the students' lives.

Still other lessons can be learned from the LabVida team in their roles training teachers. As Zapatista youth and educators become "promoters" within their own schools and communities, facilitation of agroecology, or of any other topic, involves sharing tools of teaching. LabVida specifically trained the teachers in methodologies of Popular Education, inquiry-based learning, and participatory research. The program had already published a complete manual of activities for all levels that connect core school curriculum to activities in the school garden. These foundations connect the lessons to the lived experience of the students, and creates a learning environment in which everyone has something to contribute. Zapatista education, also founded in principles of

popular education, is engaged in the constant practice of developing and implementing new learning activities.

One prominent theme in my conversation with Merce was the importance of the recovery of local knowledge to agroecology and to the success of LabVida's program. As a foundation to the methodology that the LabVida team taught to the teachers, local knowledge was one of the five axes of the diploma program. Using lessons in the garden as a tool to bridge local knowledge and other core curricula, teachers were able to instigate a dialogue of knowledge with the students. Particularly in intercultural educational settings such as these, *diálogo de saberes* is primary to decolonizing the "classroom."

Local knowledge is as elemental to agroecology as soil. For this reason, generational loss of traditional knowledge in *campesino* communities is pervasive in conversations around the scaling-out of agroecology. In other words, agroecological practices are rooted not only in the specific soil conditions and water flows, but also in the culture and history of that territory, and shared through practice from one generation to the next (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2013b). Amidst the many pressures on rural communities, traditional wisdom can quickly be lost. As Merce expressed to me, "it takes so long to learn something, but in only one generation, you can lose everything!" A disconcerting belief in many communities, she shared, was that the reason for going to school and receiving an education was to leave the life in the countryside, to stop

being *campesinos*. This trend, she said, creates the context in which “we see everything from outside more positively, but we have things that are very cool inside, that we don’t see.” In the harsh light of “modernity,” elders and youth alike allow local knowledge to pass into obscurity. Recognition and valorization of local knowledge in the schools, on the other hand, re-directs the gaze from outward to inward. Teachers in LabVida’s program were encouraged to engage the students in inquiry like, “How does my grandmother cook? How does my mother cook?” Through processes of self-reflection and simple inquiry, students reinforce their cultural identity and engage with their elders.

Consultation with local knowledge of the students also had more pragmatic implications for the gardens. Merce shared that, “we had teachers that were in totally rural schools, who had never, never, never worked with the soil.” In this case, she said, “the students became the teachers in the garden, and the teacher needed to be able to say...I am going to listen to my students because they are the ones who can tell me which seeds, how it’s done, what cycles of the moon, and so on...” The students’ wisdom, gained through their life experience, was indispensable to anything being planted at all! Though all situations will not be so stark, the essential knowledge of both the material (physical properties of the land) and immaterial (cultural meanings and social constructs) territories can only come from the students and by extension, their communities (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). Soil conditions, slope, water accessibility, and interactions among species, as well as the needs of families and communities all form the foundation



for understanding complex agroecosystems. This intimate knowledge that every child develops as part of intentional participation in her/his community practices is the basis for all agroecology — it is necessarily place-specific (Morales et al 2017).

LabVida-trained teachers promoted students actively engaging with their communities, asking questions and recording observations in their field journals. In this way, the activities around the garden “managed to open the doors of the school...now it’s not just the school, but the community, and the family...” that all become loci of learning. The community becomes a space for learning, and the school becomes a space for community. Activities that took place in the school garden created opportunities for co-production of knowledge and sharing (Ferguson et al. 2019). Using participatory research, students go out into their communities to gather information, from physical characteristics to local needs.

One other theme from the conversation with Merce stood out as an example for other efforts in agroecology education— the importance of the community of learners that goes beyond the training. According to an evaluation of the program, the LabVida team had deliberately set out to establish some continuity for the schools after the funding cycle was over. Specifically, they tried to help teachers identify allies in the community and the school to continue the garden effort. They also encouraged participation in the International Network of School Gardens that met annually. But what was most successful, what Merce called, “a lovely achievement,” was that the alumni organized

themselves in order to continue co-generating knowledge through sharing. Following a gathering of the international network in Mexico City, the alumni of the program decided to create their own statewide network that would continue the learning exchange that they had had in their program, every month. She explained that:

[The network] has gotten stronger, and is already a very autonomous figure, very self-managing ... we don't have resources of any kind, right? It's the sheer will of organization. We go to a meeting, and well, each one brings something to share for food or if we go from San Cris to Teopisca... I have a car, well, why not get five of us to pay for gasoline...it is done a little bit that way. But it works very well, and it is already serving to bring many more people closer, many more people interested in the issues of agroecology and food, can approach and can be in Network with other people who work on these issues.

*Red Chiapaneca de Huertos Educativos (RCHE)* holds intensives in medicine making, workshops in green manures, and seminars in techniques to link the garden to their curriculum. The development of the RCHE was driven by the alumni of the program to continue learning collectively. Just as *campesino-a-campesino* is one of the principal mechanisms by which organizations within *La Via Campesina* share agroecology principles and practices, the self-organized horizontal apprenticeship and peer-pedagogy of the RCHE demonstrates the potential for the spread of new skills and techniques amongst a community of learners. The cadre of alumni from LabVida's program branch out into their respective communities, organizations, and schools, later coming back together to share their challenges and their successes, and generate new knowledge in the process.

The conversation with Merce, in addition to several brief interactions with researchers from the LabVida team, illuminated several aspects of education in agroecology specific to the seemingly limitless nuance and diversity of the Mayan territory that is Chiapas. Working with Zapatista autonomous communities in resistance presents layers of complexity for which there is no prescription. This is true of agroecology in general. Lessons learned by LabVida alumni will have varying applicability and correspondence to the work of Schools for Chiapas with the Zapatista students. However, the pedagogical principles demonstrated in LabVida's work, are likely beneficial to the future work of Schools for Chiapas. These principles reflect other educational efforts within the international movement for the scaling-out of agroecology, as articulated by scholars within *La Via Campesina*. They are:

1. **Dialogue between Ways of Knowing** -LabVida emphasized techniques for the teachers to connect with the students' knowledge, opening the doors of the school to the community. In its manual of activities compiled from LabVida's graduating teachers, each lesson opens with a recovery of local knowledge. These exercises are premised on the idea of the dialogue of ways of knowing, by which the experience and understanding of the students contextualize the objectives of learning. This, in particular, emphasizes the vital role of indigenous *cosmovisión*.
2. **Teaching-Learning**- In establishing this dialogue, the educator sets the stage for teaching-learning, which is a non-hierarchical relationship in which the educator is also a learner (McCune and Sánchez 2018, Muñoz 2014.) Rather than filling the

students up with new knowledge, the facilitator's role is to create space for the generation of collective knowledge wherein each individual can contribute. The students' experiences reinforce one another, inspiring more depth of sharing as confidence in the process grows.

3. **Participatory Research and Processes-** Teachers in the LabVida program inspired students in conducting their own research using ethnographic interviews with family and community members, and recording observations in field journals. Participatory assessments of community need and potential, conducted with the students, informed the development of each school's unique plan.
4. **Community of Praxis-** This has to do with the creation of a community where learning emerges from reflection on actions taken in order to inform future action. Based on my conversation with Merce, the learning community that has formed around *Red Chiapaneca de Huertos Educativos* exemplifies a space where collective reflection and practice are in dialogue.

#### **DESMI A.C.**

Few other organizations in Chiapas have the depth of experience and insight that DESMI (Civil Association for the Economic and Social Development of Indigenous Mexicans) has in the practice of *diálogo de saberes*. The dialogue between ways of knowing (in the case of DESMI, between scientific and traditional Mayan knowledge) as the seedbed for intercultural dialogue and exchange, creates the conditions by which the other principles of agroecology education are possible. DESMI's work in its 50 years of

accompaniment of indigenous communities involves intensive and ongoing apprenticeship to the lived realities and *cosmovisión* of the communities. These humbling encounters infuse the practices of their team with the spirit of the communities in which they work. In a conversation with Rigo, an agroecologist at DESMI, speaking of agroecology said:

In the communities, they call it *ich'el ta muk'*, which means respect for the greatness of things, or to recognize that all things are precious. And we don't have the right to destroy them, because in this relationship, on this relationship our entire subsistence depends, because we are all interrelated.

Rigo described that similar practices of dialogue take place in the communities, and that listening to one another and creating new knowledge is common practice.

In the communities it happens daily, of why you say what you say. What are your arguments, or what makes what you say valid? There is no rejection out of hand or a judgement against you... and then you receive what they say, and their proposals, and you adapt your daily practice. It generates a dialogue of knowledge... in this way traditional knowledge is one of dialogues...

In the same way, processes of agroecology evolve in spaces where knowledge is co-produced. It is not homogenous. Rigo emphasized that our very survival is dependent on that diversity of knowledge. He gave an example of the recessive genes in corn that act as indicators of an imbalance that needs to be corrected. This has been part of the knowledge of the communities for millennia. Left to the forces of neoliberalism, however, all one's seed would be homogenous, and vulnerable, he explained. I couldn't

tell if this was an example of local knowledge, an analogy for local knowledge, or both. He has clearly been profoundly impacted by his time in the communities.

Rigo claimed that 90% of everything he knows about agroecology, he learned in the communities themselves, from the mountains and the *campesinos* themselves. The team's efforts include supporting agroecological food systems and ecological techniques, solidarity economies and strengthening collectives, and collaborative work with the promoters in seven centers of agroecology. Their methodology lies in horizontal practices of *campesino-a-campesino*, working through the organizational structures, and the socio-cultural contexts of the communities. With the knowledge that the best teacher of the *campesino* is another *campesino*, DESMI's work assumes that everyone is a community promoter. This peasant pedagogy involves experiential learning, collective work, and reflection "according to the times and ways" of the communities.

These developments in methodology, evolved through DESMI's own practice, reflection, and evaluation. DESMI too, has experienced the challenges in solidarity and limitations of their teaching methods. Rigo dates his work, and DESMI's work with agroecology back to the 2003 formation of the EZLN's autonomous centers of governance. He recounted a story in which, in the early days, DESMI worked with promoters to establish greenhouses in which they could grow tomatoes. Six years later, in an evaluation, the promoters came to DESMI and said, "For all that you have told us about agroecology, we

have not been able to produce a single tomato!” DESMI went to find that, in fact, they had put plastic on greenhouse structures, but were not monitoring the humidity, or planting companion plants. Their intent, as outsiders, to teach about greenhouses had failed. Through lessons like these, DESMI came to the process of dialogue, not simply repeating the technical aspects of how a greenhouse works, but learning how the ideas translate into the languages and epistemes of the communities.

When we, of Schools for Chiapas, spoke with the DESMI team in December 2018, they emphasized the connectedness of community life — that celebration was not separate from social responsibility, that work was not separate from spirituality. In the process of co-generation of agroecological knowledge alongside the communities, DESMI has come to understand the Tseltal Mayan concept of *lekil kuxlejal*. This principle of living a fulfilling life, a life in balance with all things, connects to ancestral practices of ceremony, of planting, of honoring responsibilities to the collective and respecting the greatness of all things.

DESMI’s long relationship, and consistent communication with the autonomous Mayan communities, in addition to their expertise, are almost unmatched in Chiapas. And yet, even they have experienced rough waters in their navigation of solidarity. Given this, a U.S.-based organization is bound to face some unique challenges in this realm. However, here I represent DESMI’s commitment to praxis as a model to aspire to. In particular, their dedication to a dialogue that puts the realities, processes, and priorities of the

communities “in the front seat” is a model for the development of initiatives that respond to the emergent conditions in communities (McCune et al. 2014).

DESMI’s concentration in peasant pedagogy also offers potential inspiration and guidance as Schools for Chiapas orients itself to work on new initiatives. Be they students of the ESRAZ schools, or the members of the Education Committee, or a collective of beekeepers, facilitation of processes of peer education will be most effective in the long-term.

## **Conclusion**

These observations and accounts of Schools for Chiapas’ work in the ESRAZ of Morelia with the agroecological food forest initiative were made over the course of a tumultuous year-and-a-half. Because of this limited frame of reference, I cannot claim an understanding of the complex circumstances leading to the FFI development and its dissolution. It was an ambitious project with visionary objectives. But as Peter Brown noted, it needed “more practical successes.” In light of this, my analysis explores the project through the lens of the pedagogical principles of agroecological education in other Latin American social movements and specifically, other local models. These observations, interviews, and conversations with DESMI as an organization, and LabVida as a program, about their practices in agroecology education, offer insights by which SfC might revise its own. In the spirit of praxis, this analysis reflects limitations and opportunities of the FFI, in order to inform potential future efforts.



This exploration elides larger questions as to the role of Schools for Chiapas in Zapatista territory. I suggest that the potentials of the unique relationship between SfC and the Zapatista communities in resistance, as a nexus for the dialogue between ways of knowing, reside more in what SfC has to learn than what it has to teach. It should also be said, though, that from my observations in the communities, the dynamism of this solidarity seems to motivate and inspire all parties. This exchange, or *intercambio* as it is understood by the Zapatistas, is a vibrant element of constructing a world in which many fit. The following chapter is dedicated to my recommendations and conclusions.

## Chapter Four: Lessons from Agroecology

### Summary

The 1994 insurgency of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas sounded the alarm on the neoliberal “model of death” that was destroying indigenous and peasant livelihoods globally. Though their declaration specifically denounced the five hundred years of Mayan enslavement, abuse, neglect and genocide under colonialism and neo-colonialism, the Zapatista’s call for a “world in which many worlds fit” (EZLN 1996) encompassed “all the rejected and oppressed minorities, who resist, explode and say ‘Ya basta!’” (EZLN 1994). The power of their appeal compelled activists from the Global North and around the world to join the struggle for democracy, justice and liberty. Many like myself and Peter Brown, the founder of Schools for Chiapas, discovered that we were captivated by the righteous humility and the dignified rage of the Mayan freedom fighters. Two and a half decades later, we remain disciples of the movement we support.

The Mayan rebellion inspired the solidarity and support of organizations around the globe. In 1997, Schools for Chiapas, a U.S.-based solidarity organization, proposed to build a school in what is now the *caracol* of Oventik, a Zapatista center of governance just forty-five minutes from San Cristóbal. This major construction of the first Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Secondary School (ESRAZ), set SfC’s 23 years of solidarity and apprenticeship in motion.

In 2003, after years of broken peace talks, and the Mexican government betrayal of its signed agreements with the EZLN, the Zapatistas announced that they would no longer negotiate with the Mexican government or other state entities to reach consensus on their basic rights. Instead, this was a time to “exercise power” (Reyes and Kaufman 2011). The formation of both regional and municipal centers of governance marked the official beginning of Zapatista autonomy. The Zapatista communities established their own systems of governance in order to see to the well-being, cultural continuity, and defense of territory in the Zapatista communities. These systems are comprised of *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, or Councils of Good Government the commissions that monitor and advise them, and committees that oversee the development of three pillars of Zapatista autonomy — health, agroecological production and commercialization, and education (Starr et al. 2011). Schools for Chiapas’ years of commitment and support of Zapatista autonomy have traversed all of areas of work. To understand the most recent effort to implement secondary school food forests, I elaborate specifically on the significance of agroecology and education.

Zapatista education is a vital development for the quality of life in indigenous communities, as well as for the advancement of their project of autonomy. To this end, Schools for Chiapas continues to provide resources for the construction of schools and the production of materials. As Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System (SERAZ) became increasingly independent of outside support, however, Schools for Chiapas’ work on the ground veered toward workshops in tree planting, medicine-making, and

bee-keeping. The relationships that Peter Brown and others built for the organization became the foundation for the food forest initiative (FFI). This collaboration with the Education Committee of Morelia, according to Peter Brown, would be the core of agroecology education for the zone. In fact, it was a monumental endeavor. In addition to pulling together the resources for facilitation, travel, and food for four multi-day workshops, Schools for Chiapas built a nursery and hired staff to maintain a continuous supply of plants for distribution to these sites. At the time of writing, in September 2019, the Education Committee cancelled the initiative, and invited Schools for Chiapas to make another proposal to Zapatista leadership. Taking into consideration the roles of both education and agroecology to Zapatista autonomy, this paper reflects on the goals of the FFI, and also evaluates the challenges and potential of its execution. I draw examples and inspiration from other efforts in agroecology education, in order to inform SfC's future efforts.

For the Zapatista communities, as for indigenous and peasant movements around the globe, the ability to produce food that sustains their families, in a manner that honors their traditions and their relationship with the Earth, is at the heart of their struggle. Food production is indispensable to life with dignity and autonomy. Agroecology, for the rural social movements of the Global South, is both a physical practice and ideological position in their struggle against neoliberalism and in defense of territory and cultural identity. It embodies practices that heal the planet and restore diversity while defying the homogenizing discourse of "modernity" and "development" perpetuated by regimes

on both the left and right. Agroecology is therefore essential to one of the pillars of Zapatista autonomy; and it is the “peasant way” of *La Via Campesina* and its Latin American contingent, the CLOC- LVC, in the struggle for food sovereignty.

In the interest of building the strength of their movements, and physically “scaling out” agroecology across territories, organizations of the CLOC-LVC have invested deeply in both informal and formal education processes dedicated to agroecological *formación*.

These schools and grassroots initiatives alike concentrate not only on sharing techniques of agroecology, but also strengthening the critical theory that accompanies these practices. Facilitation in these settings is horizontal, and the generation of knowledge is collective, always starting from the local knowledge and the sharing of all participants.

Both grassroots community organizations and the Latin American Institutes of Agroecology employ pedagogical principles of Popular Education, as articulated by Paolo Freire, and horizontal “peasant pedagogies” in the *formación* of cooperative citizens for a new, and just reality.

Zapatista education is similarly influenced by Freirean liberatory education. Efforts of Zapatista education promoters are dedicated to valorizing Mayan languages and cultures, while preparing youth with the critical thinking skills necessary to assume their unique roles in Zapatista autonomy. With an emphasis on the collective process and cooperative work, youth in the ESRAZ are liaisons for information between their schools and their communities. Despite the advancements of Zapatista autonomous education,

however, the *caracoles* have each developed “according to their own times and ways.” In addition, Zapatista promoters of education do not leave the territory for further training. This has opened pathways for organizations like Schools for Chiapas to support autonomous processes. In these cases, *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* may welcome outside perspectives and information. The development of the FFI, a visionary experiment in agroecology education, for example, was driven by eagerness on the parts of both Schools for Chiapas and the Education Committee of Morelia.

This professional paper is a reflection on the achievements and challenges of the food forest initiative. Through my conversations with Peter Brown, co-coordinator and founder, and other volunteers and staff of SfC, I share how the FFI came into being, my observations of one workshop as a snapshot of its implementation, and the particulars of the challenges it faced. I express several logistical challenges of the FFI, which Schools for Chiapas had little ability to ameliorate. Because of this, I consider that the realm in which SfC has most responsibility for is that of the “classroom.” This is where lessons from other efforts in agroecology come in.

My interviews in Chiapas with those who work in agroecology education coincide with pedagogical principles of the diverse movements of *La Via Campesina*. Both LabVida, a teacher training program, and DESMI, an organization that works alongside the Zapatista communities in building autonomy, shared their wisdom and lessons learned in this area. Among their shared practices is a foundation of *diálogo de saberes*, or

dialogue between ways of knowing. This practice sets the table for indigenous ways of knowing to emerge in the decentering of the Western episteme. The humility of these perspectives, and their practices in the continuous cycle of inquiry have been extremely instrumental in informing mine.

### **Lessons from Agroecology Education**

Formed in the midst of the “First Intergalactic Encounter” between the Zapatistas and international civil society, Schools for Chiapas is an organization defined by its *intercambio* and dialogue with Zapatista communities in resistance. In its 23 years of accompanying the Zapatista struggle, SfC has responded to the shifting dynamics in the movement, instigating conversations and making connections between the EZLN and struggles worldwide. From this space, part of its role has been to bring the lessons from the Zapatista struggle to the United States (a role which is beyond the scope of this paper), while another has been to bring resources and fresh perspectives from outside the autonomous Mayan communities. As I have intimated, Schools for Chiapas is not essential to the scaling of agroecology in Zapatista territory. Its potential for future contributions and *intercambio* of this kind, with the resources that it is able to bring, will be wholly dependent on deep listening and receptivity to the knowledge of the communities. *Diálogo de saberes* is the basis of this relationship.

In my experiences and conversations with people about their efforts in agroecology education, *diálogo de saberes* was by far the most prominent theme. Merce, of LabVida

emphasized that many factors of the LabVida teacher training relied on establishing dialogue with the knowledge of the students, in order to make connections that were relevant to their lives. Rigo expressed that almost everything he knew about agroecology came from the knowledge of the communities. The facilitator accompanies the emergence of local knowledge, through horizontal pedagogies. This establishes an environment of mutual apprenticeship in which each person contributes equally to the collective knowledge.

Engagement with local knowledge is vital to agroecology for a number of reasons: the valorization of local knowledge stimulates intergenerational dialogue and promotes cultural continuity; this co-generation of knowledge implies dialogue with the knowledge that students already possess from participation in community life; agroecology is place-based -- generational and millennial understandings of the land and its diversity are the foundations of traditional practices which respect the limitations of the land and maintain equilibrium; and finally, the socio-political circumstances and pressures on each generation bring with them unique perspectives, making youth perspectives integral.

I must emphasize that my experience of the FFI workshops was limited to the single workshop in which I participated, and as I have said, the accounts of pedagogical practice in the workshop varied. Some corroborated my experience while others shared very different experiences. Though I cannot say which was the more prominent



experience, from the overall outcomes, I suggest that intentional dialogue with local knowledge in all activities is paramount. The examples below suggest the questions that a dialogue may try to bring up, and how those questions address the points above.

*Who are these youth? What are their stories?*

Facilitation of the sharing of experiences from students' homes and lives values their unique experience within their own communities. Peter Brown assessed that the isolation of the ESRAZ schools was an obstacle to intergenerational exchange, however, the youth have been steeped in relationship with food and soil and ceremony all of their lives. Calling on them to tell their stories, through movement or writing or storytelling gives them an opportunity to see and value the similarities that they share with other students, as well as the richness of its diversity.

*What might the youth share with one another? How might they do it?*

Participatory dynamics in which students facilitate co-generation of knowledge engage skills that the youth have developed as active agents in their schools and their communities. This also creates opportunities for practicing participatory research with one another that could extend into their home and school communities. Development of research questions to ask of their peers prepares them for the kinds of inquiry they might make in their communities, reinforcing the idea of seeking solutions from the collective diversity of their communities, while encouraging intergenerational exchange.

*What do their communities (school or home) feel like? What are their features?*

Though Schools for Chiapas facilitators could not conduct workshops in each of the school communities, the opportunity to get the youth thinking about their own knowledge, and that of their communities (about plants, water flows, and medicines, etc.), is an opportunity to learn about their world as they experience it. Forming small groups that share the physical attributes, planting practices, and agricultural challenges of their particular sites creates an opportunity for the students to share traditional practices of their home communities to compare to the site of their school. Exercises like the 3-D mapping of a food forest help to conceptualize the spatial relationships, the needs of the plants, etc.

*What is their vision for their food forest (or other practice)? What about food, or medicine, or plants interests them? What are the priorities of their communities? What do they (the youth) want or need?* In my conversations with those who have worked in Popular Education, the process of imagining the world that you want to create is fundamental. For youth, in particular Zapatista youth, that visioning comes from the very specific circumstances of their times. Agroecological praxis is contingent upon the ecological, social, cultural and economic factors, and therefore must engage what it means to be fifteen, in a remote canyon in Chiapas, in a community in resistance, struggling for autonomy. In order for something like a food forest to have relevance, it must come from their experience and vision and connect to their priorities and needs.

One clear practice for engaging the priorities and needs of the youth would be to involve them directly in the planning. The development of the food forest “dream,” as one participant called it, was predominantly negotiated between the Education Committee (with directives from the communities) and Schools for Chiapas. It was not, on the other hand, negotiated very much with the youth themselves. In conversation with Merce, she mentioned that the inquiry with the students, and the research they did in their own homes became an important part of assessing and addressing community food systems, be that with a school garden or otherwise. Similarly, the food forests might have benefitted from doing participatory assessments with the youth in which it they determined what they would grow, how it would be used, and what they hoped for it would be.

Participatory process is foundational to *formación* in ESRAZ schools, and also within agroecology schools of CLOC-LVC. Collective agreements on the study plan and school schedules, in addition to collective work and meal preparation are all part of the educational processes (McCune et al. 2014; Rosset et al. 2019). As many Zapatista youth are responsible for collective work in their communities by the time they are fifteen, they are often more capable of cooperative processes than most adults living in the United States. The food forest planning, however, did not engage them. Though communication in advance of a workshop would not be possible, the workshops might have integrated agenda planning into the first couple hours on the first day.

Participation in decisions around their own education further instills confidence in their

own knowledge production capacities. This involvement in the workshops would direct focus to the priorities of the youth and their communities, in which the youth are actively resolving issues that affect their lives. Ownership results in better outcomes.

Another important aspect of integrating participation of the youth in planning is gender. Despite significant advancements in gender equity within Zapatista processes, women continue to be under-represented in community charges that take them away from the home, with the Education Committee being an example. Amongst the youth, however, there is a much better representation of young women in school. Participatory processes in this space, then, have the important function of equalizing gender influences on any given project.

Included in this category of lessons learned (though it may well be resolved by engaging youth in the bigger-picture participation) is a recommendation for experiential learning and hands-on practice in every way possible. LabVida's development of curriculum for use in the school garden converted the garden into a pedagogical space where lessons from language to history were connected to garden activities. From planting to food preparation, collective activities build tangibly on skill-bases by connecting practice with new information. For these reasons, "field work" and "classroom work" in agroecology schools are either equal or weighted toward "field work" (McCune et al. 2014). Even in instances in which the plot is not available, physical simulations, and tactile or sensory learning experiences improve one's ability to assimilate information. As one example,

practices in participatory research and observation engage spaces outside of the “school,” and connect the learning from the classroom to its function in the community.

Lastly, with regard to participatory processes, as I mentioned, the final FFI workshop did include an evaluation by the students of what they liked of the workshop content, and what could have been better. I would say that for any future endeavors of SfC in Zapatista education, the centering of youth in all aspects of development, planning, facilitation and evaluation will be more fruitful. As Peter said, “with ownership, comes knowledge.”

Finally, with regard to pedagogical lessons learned in my experience of the FFI, is the importance of the cultivation of a learning community through building *esprit de corps*. Movement scholars of LVC and CLOC-LVC focus explicitly on the role of education in scaling-out agroecology as a tool of popular land reform, social transformation, and food sovereignty. Common to their analysis is the critical function of building movement cadre, that is to say, a community of peers whose practice of agroecology focuses on larger social transformation (McCune et al. 2017, 2014; McCune and Sánchez 2018; Rosset et al. 2019). This process, in LVC associated schools, is very intentional. In talking with Merce and other LabVida researchers, however, the alumni from the teacher-training without any prompting from the Labvida team, took on its own processes of self-organization, and continuation of their community of praxis spontaneously.

Despite SfC's strong political solidarity with the Zapatista movement, it is not the place of an outsider to impel cadre formation; however, as with LabVida, SfC facilitators can intentionally create an environment in which the camaraderie of a learning community is nurtured. As has been suggested by scholars of CLOC-LVC processes of *formación*, activities that call upon creative thinking, such as theater and poetry, or physical games "ice-breakers" that build trust and create bonds, connect the individual learner to her peers in processes of collective learning (McCune and Sánchez 2018). Whether or not the Zapatista youth are able to convene outside of the workshops, building cadre across territories amplifies a sense of purpose and belonging.

As I have expressed, the food forest initiative that Schools for Chiapas so enthusiastically tried to implement faced several challenges to its execution. The lessons above involve: establishing a *diálogo de saberes*, drawing out local knowledge through horizontal pedagogies, engaging the youth in participatory processes, and cultivating trust and sharing in a learning community as common pedagogical practices amongst the diverse environments of agroecological *formación*. These practices, I suggest, offer some avenues for evolution in SfC's efforts. I would be remiss, though, if I did not address the more logistical concern about continuity of communication and presence in the region.

Zapatista communities are experiencing increasing militarization by federal troops, counterinsurgency tactics fomented by government policies and programs, and challenges from neighboring communities over territory and water. They face daily

choices about priorities for survival. In light of this volatility, the solidarity work of SfC must be adaptable in responding to the priorities explicitly stated by autonomous communities themselves. Continuity of communication with the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, or Good Government Council, and the communities with which it is working, as well as current awareness of the local political dynamics is vital if it is to make relevant contributions to the lives of indigenous *campesinos*.

Continuity of communication involves a regular presence in Chiapas for a variety of reasons: All major decisions about community and education works in the communities must pass through the centers of Zapatista governance, the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, wherein they are allocated to the appropriate committee to oversee execution. Organizations working closely with Zapatista governance over the years have grown accustomed to the response, “come back in two weeks” or “maybe after planting season.” Responsiveness to the changing conditions is paramount to an evolving dialogue. Speaking with one of the *Juntas* requires a day, or even two-day trip — this can be tricky, even for a local organization, as it is a journey that is precariously balanced on transportation availability, changes in weather, decisions made at other levels of governance, and regular threats to their communities. In this environment, the nurturing of relationships, and skillful navigation within narrow windows of opportunity become critical.

Remarkably, SfC’s understanding of the EZLN processes, as well as its adaptability, have allowed it to continue working, even as other organizations have been asked to leave

the territory. But raising funds for the building of schools is a matter of delivering money, and even medicine making and tree-planting demonstrations can be discreet one-off workshops. Agroecology and climate change abatement practices, on the other hand, are necessarily place-specific, information intensive processes. If SfC is to have a continued involvement in this realm, it will hinge on a consistent and trusted relationship the Zapatista communities, one that is rooted in dialogue.

These lessons are informed by my personal observations and relationships in Chiapas, the wisdom of trusted comrades, and the thorough *sistematización*, or documentation and analysis by movement actors and researchers in the scaling of agroecology. Despite the extensive history of Schools for Chiapas solidarity with Zapatista communities, SfC's future praxis will guide its path through the unique intercultural relationships that its team maintains. Horizontal and participatory processes, exemplified by the Zapatistas themselves, and *diálogo de saberes* are central to decolonizing solidarity. These are the practices of walking while asking questions.

## **Conclusion and Reflections**

Recently the Zapatistas announced the expansion of their centers of governance and major shifts in their structures of autonomy. The EZLN, through its communiqués and several invitations to encounters appears to be instigating a renewal of its relationships with the international community. The defense of these territories entails the expansion of their capacities in autonomous health, education and agroecological production.



Schools for Chiapas also stands at the crossroads of significant organizational transition. The ending of SfC's four-year implementation of food forests at the Zapatista coincides with its founders' desire to take a step back from the organization and pass it on to the next generation. Over the next several months, those of us involved in decision-making will be discussing its focus and thinking about a plan for solidarity that articulates with the EZLN's priorities. Schools for Chiapas inhabits a unique relationship with the Zapatista autonomous communities that, for its history and dynamism, would be unfortunate to abandon. Few organizations have SfC's longevity in this regard. Its communications with members of the Zapatista Education Committee of the *caracol* of Morelia, and its reputation for school construction throughout the territories in resistance, among its various other contributions, have been negotiated in careful communication over more than two decades. In light of this, I dedicate these observations, analyses and reflections to the future of Schools for Chiapas.

The original intent of this professional paper was to evaluate the significance of the food forest initiative in the eyes of the Zapatista youth. With the postponement and subsequent cancellation of the FFI, however, my focus turned to an evaluation of Schools for Chiapas' role in autonomous education, and in particular, agroecology education. I feel that these efforts to contextualize the work of Peter Brown, Susan Beattie and volunteers of Schools for Chiapas, have helped to contribute meaningfully to my own understanding of the relationship between solidarity and indigenous autonomy. In late July 2019, I visited Peter and Susan in their home in San Diego. I was

sharing the process of writing this paper with Susan, and trying to decide who it was really written for. She said, “Maybe you are writing it for yourself.” In my efforts to help shape the future of SfC’s work, that may indeed be the case.

Though this experience represents a tiny glimpse of the work of the organization, the opportunity to observe and participate in numerous scenarios with Peter and Susan in their capacity as Schools for Chiapas has provided tremendous insight into the SfC’s historical relationships in Zapatista territory. In articulating with the movements of Zapatista autonomy, they have maintained a consistent, albeit punctuated, presence in the region since the organization formed. Nimble honing their message for donors back in the United States, they bridge trends of the times with the current work in Chiapas. The creation of the food forest initiative was such an endeavor.

In this way, the work of Schools for Chiapas does create an opportunity for *intercambio*. One morning, while I was in the communities with Peter, a member of the Education Committee dropped by to ask about the Bhagavad Gita, and if we could find a copy for him. In fact, several interactions like this one, demonstrated a genuine curiosity and eagerness for this kind of exchange. To my surprise, it occurred to me for the first time that that we (the *gringos*) might have something to share, and that that novelty was mutual. The conditions for mutual apprenticeship, though, are sustained in an exchange that does not advantage one way of knowing over another.

Relationships such as these are built in trust and in the consistency of accompaniment and cooperation. The evolution of the idea for the food forests was based on years of relationships and rapport built by Peter Brown. The future of Schools for Chiapas' solidarity with the processes of Zapatista autonomy will depend not only on a similar level of consistency, but also on the ability and humility to listen deeply and reflect on its capacity and its limitations. New relationships with a new generation of Zapatista leadership will take shape "in their own times and ways." In the meantime, I suggest that those of us involved in Schools for Chiapas commit ourselves to deepening the foundations of dialogue.

Solidarity, like agroecology, is a complex system that requires astute observation, deep listening, and hands-in-the-soil praxis. More than a year and a half into my relationship with Schools for Chiapas, I have just begun to develop relationships of my own. Those relationships, which have taught me about agroecology and popular education, about justice and the greatness of things, have impressed upon me the depth of practice and reflection required to create a world in which many fit. My conversations in the Zapatista autonomous Mayan communities in resistance have reinforced my understanding that the persistence of other ways of knowing is vital to our planetary well-being. They continue to humble me, and to teach me what it means to be human.

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