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Stuart Plattner

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND OCCUPATIONAL  
CHANGE IN A DEVELOPING AREA OF MEXICO

Stuart Plattner

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IN A DEVELOPING AREA OF MEXICO

Stuart Plattner

Research Associate, Center for International Studies  
Associate Professor of Anthropology, Department of  
Sociology/Anthropology/Social Work

## Introduction

The Chiapas highlands of southeastern Mexico are well known in the anthropological literature as the home of some well-studied Mayan Indians (Cancian 1965, 1972; Colby 1966; Collier 1975; Laughlin 1975, 1977; Vogt 1969), and as a prime example of an underdeveloped region (Aguirre Beltran 1967, Stavenhagen 1975). I studied a community of Ladinos (people who speak Spanish and consider themselves Mexican rather than Indian) in this region in 1967 and again in 1977. During this time the Mexican federal government instituted major projects of economic development in the Chiapas Highlands. I will describe the impact of this development upon a traditional sector of the urban community: long distance itinerant peddlers. These traders live in the barrio of Cuxtitali, a small endogamous neighborhood in the central city of San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. <sup>1</sup>

## The Chiapas Highlands

Highland Chiapas is an area of roughly 15,000 square kilometers occupied by about 335,000 people (PRODESCH 1976). This represents about a tenth of the land area and a little more than a fifth of the total population of the state of Chiapas, which borders Guatemala's Western frontier. The highlands are mainly occupied by Mayan Indian peasant farmers living in communities which range from about 1,500 to 2,500 meters of altitude. The communities are usually dispersed in small hamlets surrounding township centers of varying

sizes, degrees of urbanity, and proportion of non-Indian (Ladino) population. The traditional central town of the region is San Cristobal de Las Casas. This town was founded by the Spanish conquerers in the early sixteenth century, and was at one time the state capital. It now has a rapidly growing population of Ladinos and Revestidos (literally, redressed, denoting those who are in the process of changing their ethnic identity from Indian to Ladino). The town had about 22,000 inhabitants at the end of the 1960's.

If Mexico is a "less developed country", then Chiapas is an "undeveloped" state, and the Mayan highlands of Chiapas are the "underdeveloped core of the state. This means are the highlands of the periphery, but does not mean that they have been unconnected to the economy of Central Mexico. Chiapas has imported processed goods and exported agricultural goods for hundred of years. Ladinos in the highlands occupy an elite class position and control most of the small manufacturing enterprises and all of the few large factories (a sugar mill, rum factory, and textile mill). Ladinos also control the import of manufactured goods and the export of farm goods from the region. They enjoy the benefits (and costs) of urban life and such technological comforts as each town provides, and each family can afford, at the long-run expense of a generally depressed life style for the large class of Indian peasants. While the overwhelming majority of Ladinos are wealthier than most Indians, Ladino society is much more internally stratified than Indian society. Thus the bulk of Ladinos consider themselves poor in relation to the small

group of middle-and upper-class Ladinos. A small number of Indian leaders are wealthier, in absolute terms, than the majority of Ladinos.

Chiapas does not have a complex hierarchical system of periodic markets similar to the system in Western Guatemala so brilliantly analyzed by Smith (1976). Until recently the town-farm exchange took place by means of itinerant agents using human and animal transportation. Thus cows, pigs, coffee, tobacco and corn were traditionally purchased on the farm by agents. Part of this exchange was effected by Ladino long distance itinerant peddlers based in San Cristobal, who took cloth, clothing and small hardware items out from the city and brought pigs and poultry back in return. Within San Cristobal this trade was concentrated in the barrio of Cuxtitali, where peddling, pig processing and pork distribution has been the traditional occupation for at least 300 years. The wives of the Cuxtitali men sold pork in the daily city market.

When the road system of the highlands was composed of dirt mule trails, the peddlers integrated the agricultural hinterlands with the central trading and processing town. They presented manufactured goods on the doorsteps of hinterland Indians in dispersed hamlets, at cheaper net prices than the Indians would have obtained if they had travelled to town themselves. The peddlers' ability to provide cheaper prices was due to economies of scale on their part, the very high cost of primitive transportation in the mountainous area,

and the dendritic form of the distribution system (Smith 1977), in which almost no secondary centers existed aside from the primary central town. When all-weather roads were built into the hinterlands, transportation became cheaper, secondary centers began to flourish, and the economic basis for the traders' price advantage disappeared. The occupation of peddler began to disappear, too.

The Pan-American highway was not paved in Chiapas until the 1950's. Since then the federal government spent small but continually increasing sums of money on developing the state's economic infrastructure (roads, telephone and telegraph lines, hospitals, water systems, and other health services) until the 1970's when the pace of this investment was dramatically increased. A special bureaucracy was created, titled "Program of Socio-Economic Development in the Highlands of Chiapas" (acronym PRODESCH), funded by the Mexican government and the United Nations, to coordinate economic development in the region. Over a period of five years (1972-1976) a total of 44 million dollars was spent on projects which included the construction of over a thousand kilometers of new roads, electrification and telecommunications lines, and other economic development projects (Table 1). For the Chiapas highlands, these figures are significant. The most impressive development was the construction of twice as many all-weather roads than had existed before, including an all-weather road from San Cristobal through the Ocosingo region. This opened up the heart of Highland Chiapas to motor transportation. The federal government's

interest was probably due to the recent discovery of oil in the region, and to the fact that coffee and cattle are exported from the state.

Although the development of the highlands was focused on the total region, which is predominantly agrarian, as always a disproportionate share went to the urban areas. San Cristobal gained two major new hospitals, a new telecommunications building, and became the site of numerous federally funded agencies with missions ranging from the coordination of regional interdisciplinary research in applied ecology to the support of folk crafts such as weaving and ceramics. Each new project brought with it an urban-oriented staff who required middle class housing, educational, economic, and social services. The immediate effect of large-scale economic development was thus a frenzy of urban construction to meet the demands of the incoming specialist population, at the same time that construction jobs in the region were multiplying as the transportation and communications projects themselves were brought into being. These were "external" causes of increased construction.

There were also local causes, due to the continued inflation of the Peso. This led to the devaluation of the Peso (in 1976), which further exacerbated the increases in prices. Contributing perhaps to local inflation was a rise in the price of coffee (grown in part of the region) from about 200 Pesos per sack in 1967 to 2,500 Pesos in 1977. This seemingly endless rise in prices caused



local people to invest their savings in basic materials such as housing. They felt that the prices of materials were rising so fast that any hesitation in the present might mean that they would not be able to afford the materials in the future. Thus many new jobs were created in local construction of brick and reinforced concrete buildings.

The specialists brought into San Cristobal by the economic development projects also demanded middle class goods. Clothing stores spruced up their displays, and major appliance stores offered a greater variety of expensive electrical appliances. This aspect of the changing scene directly affected the itinerant peddler community because the new middle class people consumed more meat and purchased more vegetables than the existing population of the city. Thus at the same time that the traditional suppliers of pork (those peddlers who sold cloth and bought pigs) were decreasing in number, the demand for pork and produce in the city was increasing.

In the long run, new roads and communications systems should stimulate market production in the hinterland areas of the state. Farmers settling new communities in the rainforests of Ocosingo, for example, could export the high quality peppers and other hot-country fruits and vegetables grown there if they could ship out produce in bulk. If regional production and trade increases, jobs should be created in central transfer points like San Cristobal to handle the increased commerce.<sup>2</sup> However such long-run optimism is usually proper only for the wealthy. The poor must scramble to keep

and permanently employed men.<sup>3</sup> Women were likewise employed in commerce. Although sixty percent of the women worked as housewives, over eighty percent of those wives with occupations in the public (non-family) economy were vendors of pork and produce. Husbands and wives tended to match their occupations to achieve economies of scale at the household level (Plattner 1972).

#### Cuxtitali in 1977

The primary effect of the new roads was that people and goods could flow in and out of the hinterlands with greater ease than before. Trips which took four days of walking (and therefore three nights of arranging sleeping space, provisions, etc.) now took less than one day. Indians could come into San Cristobal and shop there while they conducted other business in bureaucratic offices. Indians who never had much business in San Cristobal discovered a source of aid at the PRODESCH offices.

Traffic also increased in the reverse direction, from the center out. People with trucks could offer wholesale terms to stores in the secondary hinterland centers. Since these hinterland stores could now order goods directly from large wholesalers in Tuxtla Gutierrez (the state capital), or even from Central Mexico, the dealers in San Cristobal who traditionally monopolized this trade now had to give competitive terms. Thus, at the same time that the rural Indians were able to do more shopping in San Cristobal, the hinterland commercial centers were dramatically expanding. All this

meant a decline in the number of people interested in doing their major shopping with itinerant peddlers.

In 1977 there were 300 married couples in Cuxtitali (Table 3). This represents an apparent increase of 5.3 percent a year over the population of 1967. This increase is no doubt due primarily to a high rate of population growth, yet I feel that the increase also is derived from a structural change in the population. I classify a person as an adult economic actor if he or she is married or is conducting an independent business. In recent years young people in Cuxtitali have married somewhat earlier than they did before. Previously, young men began work as peons for their older male relatives, and entered independent commerce in a gradual way. It was difficult to set up an independent household while working as a dependent. When relatively high-paying, steady jobs became available, men could earn independent incomes at an early age, and seemed to feel able to marry as soon as they had a job. These young couples increased the pool of "independent economic actors". In addition, a few people immigrated to the barrio from rural areas of the highlands, but this was trivial compared to the settlement of entirely new neighborhoods on the outskirts of San Cristobal.

#### Changes in Male Occupations

##### Merchant

This category includes long distance itinerant cloth peddlers, peddlers who bought pigs, and buyers of poultry. The peddlers

used horses and mules to pack merchandise out to distant hinterland settlements between two and four days walk from San Cristobal. Once in the hinterland they peddled from door to door among Maya Indian peasants. Their trade was traditionalized in the sense that men learned their trade from older male kinsmen, and that relations between peddlers and customers were longstanding, regular, and had social implications as well (mainly in the custom of *compadrazgo* between Indian customers and Ladino peddlers). In every hamlet the peddlers had friends who allowed them to sleep on the veranda or in the sleeping room with the peasant family.

In 1967 all of the peddlers kept their animals in pastures in San Cristobal between trips, and walked or rode horseback from the town to their rural selling areas. By 1977 no peddler kept his animals in San Cristobal. Pack animals were left to pasture in hinterland urban centers to and from which the peddlers travelled by motor vehicle. In some cases this cut the one-way travel time from four days to one day. In addition it was no longer economically feasible to pasture animals in San Cristobal because the old pastures were no longer available.

In 1977 there were far fewer such merchants in both an absolute and a relative sense. They represented 49% of all working married men in 1967 and only 22% of the enlarged pool of such men in 1977. There would be even fewer people still peddling but for the recent rise in the price of coffee. Farmers in the Yajalon-Chilon area have planted coffee for years. The price has always fluctuated,

rising to 500 Pesos during the 1950's and dropping to about 200 Pesos per sack in the late 1960's. In 1977 the price of a sack was 2,500 Pesos and the government was sponsoring announcements on a local radio station cautioning Indian coffee growers not to sell their coffee too soon as the price could rise to 3,000 Pesos. Peddlers estimated that an average coffee grower could easily harvest ten sacks of coffee. Thus many Indians had disposable incomes of 25,000 Pesos (\$1,129 U.S.), which of course was over and above their normal subsistence harvest of corn, beans, vegetables, chickens, etc. For comparison, during the late 1960's a very successful highland corn farmer entrepreneur, who sharecropped a corn field in the productive hot country of the Grijalva river valley, earned a total of \$2,934 Pesos (\$235 U.S.) gross income from 30 sacks of corn and beans (Cancian 1972:178). The coffee farmers understandably felt wealthy and bought more expensive clothing than they ever had considered before. Thus a few of the peddlers still peddling had phenomenal sales. No one took these sales as anything more than the last flickers of a dying flame, however.

### Pig Dealers

There were more pig dealers in 1977 in absolute terms, but fewer in proportional terms than in 1967. Pig Buying, although changed, is still a viable occupation due to the growth in urban demand for pork in San Cristobal. The main discomfort of pig buying had been the long and difficult three to five day walk home

from a hinterland central bulking point, because the pigs could not walk in the hot noontime sun. Herders had to rest when and where they could, sometimes in open areas with no enclosed corrals for the pigs. They travelled at night on badly marked, sometimes muddy trails. Now pigs are bulked in a corral that is near to a motor road, and are trucked into San Cristobal in less than a day. Most of the pig dealers are young men, working with capital borrowed from a butcher. The most common arrangement is for the butcher to advance a team of young men a basic sum of capital (in 1977 as much as 20,000 Pesos or \$900 U.S.). Pig Buyers would be paid by butchers in from ten days to three weeks, after butchers were paid by their retail distributors.

### Truckers

In 1967 only the wealthiest men in Cuxtitali owned a truck. By 1977 twenty nine Cuxtitaleros owned a total of forty one vehicles. Twenty of the owners made a living predominately from their trucks. Machines owned ranged from pickups, used for local transportation, to ten-ton trucks used for long-distance commercial shipping. The growth in truck ownership in the neighborhood is graphed in Figure 1. The graph of truck ownership in Cuxtitali is like that of a growth process with limits, (e.g., Lave and March 1975:371). It seems that there was a subgroup of families in Cuxtitali who were financially able to purchase a used truck and that the market for trucks opened up with a jolt around 1970 (the same time of the beginning

of the heavy federal investment in the region). Those who were able to own trucks then bought one as soon as they observed a friend or neighbor buy one (the metaphor of catching a disease through personal contact with another is perhaps appropriate). The slow-down in increased ownership in the last year would reflect the saturation of this potential market, as practically everyone who could own a truck already owns one.

There has been a corresponding decline in the ownership of mules and horses, which were totally ubiquitous ten years ago. Ownership has decreased from more than 300 animals (not counting donkeys) to less than 30 now stabled in the barrio.

Somewhat less than half of the truck owners belong to a local cooperative commercial trucking firm which has an official monopoly over several routes into the hinterland. The rest of the owners use their trucks for private commerce.

### Craftsmen

In 1967 a few individuals made a living by practicing some skill other than commerce. There was one weaver (a dominant specialty in another barrio), a fireworks maker (a specialty of another barrio), a family of traditional marimba musicians, a barber, etc. In 1977 this general category of occupation increased to significant numbers, mainly composed of construction specialists such as bricklayers. Masonwork seems to be the easiest construction job to enter, requiring few tools beyond a trowel, and available to many people

with minimal specialized training.

### Employee

This occupational category is distinct from that of Wage Laborers or Peons in the minds of local people. Jobs in this category include attendants in retail stores, factory workers in San Cristobal's only modern factory, a cotton cloth mill which opened in 1969, or menial workers in any of the various government projects which have recently opened in the area.

### Peon

Unskilled wage labor as a helper to merchants, a field hand in local corn plots, a general helper for butchers, or a materials handler on construction jobs has traditionally been the job-of-last-resort in Cuxtitali. The cotton and sugar plantations on the Pacific Soconusco coast traditionally served as an escape hatch for those who had to leave the highlands for personal or legal reasons. In 1967 the average daily wage for a Peon who worked for a peddler was six Pesos per day (\$.48 U.S.) with room and board while on trips. This wage had increased to between ten and fifteen Pesos per day in 1977 (\$.45 - .68 U.S. in devaluated 1977 Pesos). For those fortunate enough to get a job on a government construction project, which paid the legal minimum wage, earnings were 25 to 35 Pesos daily (\$1.13 - \$1.77 U.S.) or higher. There were almost twice as many men working as Peons in 1977 as there were ten years before,



although Peons as a proportion of all working married men increased only three percent in 1977 over 1967.

### Female Occupations

#### Pork Vendor

Pork Dealers include a few women who butcher pigs with a male relative, usually their husband, in their homes, but the majority of women in this category sell meat, lard, sausage, bones and cracklings (chicharrones) in the market and along the streets of the city. This occupation requires a relatively substantial investment of capital: from about 500 Pesos (\$23 U.S.) to over 1,000 Pesos (\$45 U.S.) a day. Successful dealers withdraw all of their own invested capital from their business and try to operate entirely on credit, holding off their wholesale suppliers, the butchers, until enough of their retail customers have paid them to allow them to cover their wholesale bill. There were more than twice as many Pork Dealers in 1977 as there were ten years before. Cuxtitali women were thus taking advantage of the increased opportunities caused by the growth in urban demand for foods.

#### Produce Vendor

This category includes women who sell fruit and vegetables in the market and along the streets. Produce is usually bought in the early morning from wholesalers in the market, although in season locally grown fruits are sold. The main street leading into

Cuxtitali was known as "Las Manzanas" (the apples) because of the orchards there. Produce dealers work with as little as 100 Pesos (\$4.50 U.S.), and earn about what a male peon earns or less. The increase in numbers of Produce Dealers parallels the increase in Pork Dealers in response to the same increase in urban demand.

#### Merchant

The merchant category includes women who travel to other municipalities to set up stalls during fairs, where they sell prepared foods and imported fruits. This category also includes women who tend small shops in their homes, stocked with items of constant demand such as matches, cigarettes, sugar, noodles, sodas, etc. The number of small shops in a community should be proportional to the population since the demand for their stock is constant. The number of rural fair merchants has increased, since the exploitation of annual fairs is an occupation that allows Cuxtitaleros to use their traditional knowledge along with modern motor transportation. There are more than twice as many merchants in 1977 as there were ten years before. This form of commerce will probably maintain itself or increase as traditional long distance itinerant peddling disappears from the region.

#### Skilled Producer

This category includes women who produce traditional foods in their homes for wholesale distribution to retail vendors or for

direct retail sale. The main products are tachilguil (pork entrail stew, or chitterlings) and confite (candy produced with sugar and eggs). Dressmakers who use sewing machines are also included in this category as well. Dress making is a lower middle class occupation in local San Cristobal terms, which Cuxtitali women have rarely practiced before. This was probably due to the culturally "backwards" image held by local people about Cuxtitali residents. Now that the barrio is losing its distinctive economic identification, it will probably also lose its distinctive social personality. A sign of this will be an increase in a variety of occupations, such as dress-making with sewing machines, which are not associated with backwards or traditional values. The number of women in this general category has increased six-fold in the ten year period under consideration.

#### Unskilled Producer

This category includes servants, washerwomen, tortilla makers and vendors (including specialists in pozole, a drink made of finely ground corn and water), and other low status, unskilled female occupations comparable to the male occupation of "Peon". The number of women in these occupations has increased from five in 1967 to 22 in 1977. The increase in this category is mainly due to inflation. These women tend to be married to peons, the lowest paid male occupation. Inflation would hit their households the hardest, forcing wives to contribute to the family income if they could at all do so.

### Housewives

This is a residual category of female workers not in the public economy. The 1977 figures show that many more women are contributing to their household's income than ten years before. Some of these women are married to ex-peddlers who could not find better jobs than peons. This forced many women onto the extra-household economy to work as unskilled producers and as low-capital produce sellers. Another cause of the decrease in housewives is the increased opportunity to earn a significant income from pork vending and high-capital produce selling. Thus women are being pulled as well as pushed out of their homes into money-making occupations.<sup>4</sup>

### Discussion

In essence we have seen how a community which exploited a relatively narrow set of opportunities in a regional economy expanded its niche in response to economic development. This involved a continuation of some old activities (those merchants who are still successfully peddling, the pork and produce vendors); a combination of old skills and new technology (those merchants who bought trucks and use them in long distance wholesale trade); an expansion of new skills (those ex-peddlers now working as craftsmen or as employed workers); and even an expansion of the provision of plain labor (those working as peons and as unskilled female producers).

In a curious way Cuxtitali seems to be a bell-weather of the Highland Chiapas economy. When the dominant fact of the economy was

underdevelopment, the Cuxtitaleros worked as agents of the rural-urban exchange which defined the system (Frank 1964). When the urban economy experienced explosive development, a major part of the work effort of the neighborhood went into construction and provisioning the new urbanites. I think the culture of Cuxtitali is changing in response to this change in economic base. As the common experience of travelling in hinterland places, speaking Mayan Indian Languages, and operating under very rough rural living conditions decreases, the distinctive Cuxtitali personality seems to be becoming less common. The expansion of television into the highlands can also account for this. By 1977 there were only twenty television sets (as judged by the number of visible antennas) in the barrio while there had been none as late as 1970. It would not be surprising if, in another ten years, Cuxtitali had lost its distinctive quasi-rural character and had become like the other lower-middle class neighborhoods of the city.

### Footnotes

1. In previous work I have described how people made a living peddling (1975) and how marriage (1972) and kinship (I.P.) affected occupations in Cuxtitali. This work has been supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, National Science Foundation, and The Center for International Studies, University of Missouri-St. Louis.
2. Of course it is possible for other, more vigorous towns to capture the bulk of the growth from the traditional center, as Chicago did against St. Louis in the late Nineteenth Century.
3. A distinction is made locally between employees (Sp. empleado) and wage laborers (Sp. peon). The former are assumed to earn more, have more job security and fringe benefits, and to work for a larger organization than the latter.
4. Note that wives of craftsmen tend to stay at home as housewives ( $\chi^2= 10.12, P<.01$ ) while wives of merchants tend to work for some monetary income ( $\chi^2=8.86, P<.01$ ). Merchants presumably need their spouse's income more now than they previously did, when wives of merchants showed no tendency to work for money incomes rather than be housewives (1967 data  $\chi^2=.49, P>.20$ ). I have no explanation for why the wives of craftsmen tend to stay at home - it is not because craftsmen earn so much more than other specialists that their wives do not need to work.

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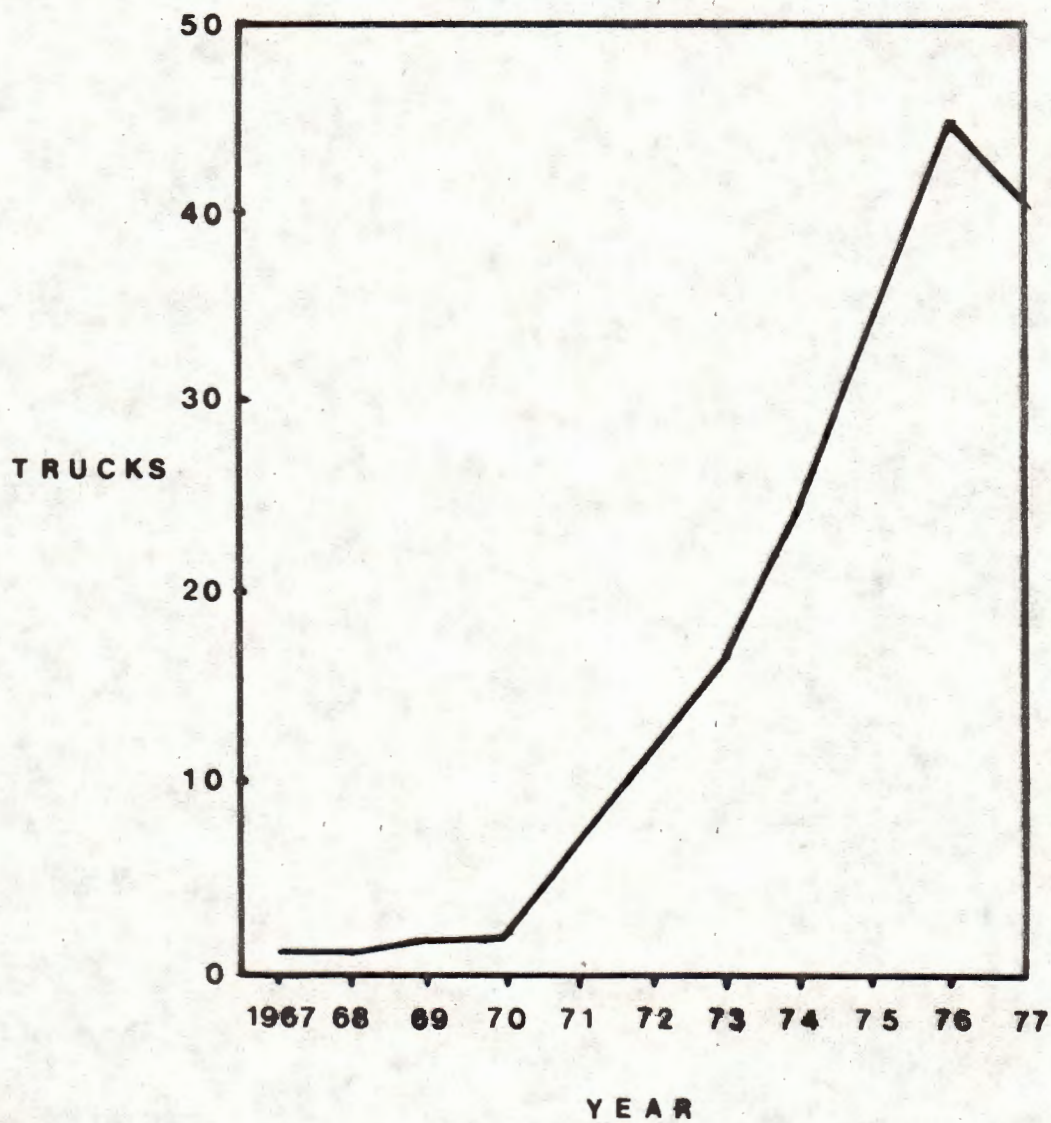
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TRUCKS IN CUXTITALI 1967 - 1977

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Table 1. Federal and State Investment in Economic Development in the Chiapas Highlands (in millions of U.S. dollars, 12.5 Pesos = 1 Dollar).  
Source: PRODESCH Sintesis Evaluativa 1976.

Sector	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	Total
Agriculture and Cattle	1.75	1.95	2.17	4.09	6.75	16.7
Roads	1.59	4.65	.97	1.27	1.81	10.29
Education	1.26	1.71	.96	1.37	.61	5.91
Industrialization and Electrification	.21	.39	.55	.42	.20	1.78
Health		1.45	1.50	3.01	2.07	8.02
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.82</b>	<b>10.15</b>	<b>6.16</b>	<b>10.15</b>	<b>11.43</b>	<b>44.30</b>

Table 2. Occupations of all married couples in Cuxtitali, 1967.

		Men							Total
		Merchant	Pig Dealer	Trucker	Craftsman	Employee	Peon	Other	
Women	Housewife	49	11	0	7	7	23	5	102
	Pork Vendor	10	8	1	0	1	1	3	24
	Produce Vendor	17	1	0	1	1	7	2	29
	Merchant	8	0	0	0	1	1	1	11
	Skilled Producer	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	4
	Unskilled Producer	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	5
	Other	3	0	0	0	0	2	0	5
	Total	89	20	1	8	10	38	14	108

Table 3. Occupations of all married couples in Cuxtitali, 1977.

		Men							Total
		Merchant	Pig Dealer	Trucker	Craftsman	Employee	Peon	Other	
Women	Housewife	22	3	7	28	25	27	7	119
	Pork Vendor	7	14	7	2	13	5	5	53
	Produce Vendor	14	3	1	9	8	18	4	57
	Merchant	17	1	3	1	1	0	2	25
	Skilled Producer	6	4	1	1	5	3	4	24
	Unskilled Producer	0	0	1	4	0	16	1	22
	Total	66	25	20	45	52	69	23	300