

# Social Strategies and Public Policies in an Indigenous Zone in Chiapas, Mexico

Carlos Cortez Ruiz

## 1 Introduction

This article examines emerging forms of participation in a variety of spaces in Chiapas, in the south of Mexico. Situated within a complex socio-political context, relations between marginalised groups, social movements and the government are articulated through experiences of participation both in “popular” and “invited” spaces. The Zapatista movement has fostered changes in relationships between marginalised groups, including indigenous people and women and the state, particularly the national government and recently created regional development programmes. These regional programmes represent the national government’s position on important issues, including the nature of socio-economic regional development, indigenous people’s rights and the protection of environmentally sensitive areas. Differences and commonalities in participation in “popular” spaces created by the Zapatista movement in autonomous municipalities, versus participation in formalised “invited” spaces within the government’s regional development programmes provide some important insights about the role of participation in bringing about change.

## 2 Chiapas: a story of exclusions and demands for change

The state of Chiapas, Mexico is in the south of the country and borders on Guatemala and Central America. Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico, with the lowest human development indices (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2002). Due to the wealth of biodiversity in Chiapas there are several Environmentally Protected Areas. Historically, Chiapas has been inhabited by different indigenous groups and it is one of the areas in Mexico with a high percentage of indigenous language speakers.<sup>1</sup> The social structure and

relations in Chiapas are defined by poverty, exclusion, discrimination, but also by a long history of social movements demanding social, economic and political changes.

Ten years ago, in January 1994, a social movement emerged in opposition to the Mexican state that aimed to reclaim Mexican society by denouncing the situation of indigenous populations and demanding changes at the national level. Their principal demand is the implementation of the San Andres Agreement by the Mexican government. Other important Zapatista positions include opposition to neo-liberal reforms and globalisation in general and government policies promoting these, including explicit opposition to the *Plan Puebla Panama* (PPP). The Zapatista’s bases are organised around autonomous municipalities where they work towards developing their own governance structures in resistance to the actual government, while advocating for renewed dialogue with the Mexican government on the Zapatista demands.

Around this movement, different social actors have established a political agenda oriented towards achieving the recognition of cultural and political rights for the indigenous population including new forms of representation and participation and development programmes that respond to their social priorities. At the local and micro-regional level an important organisational process has gained momentum through the creation of the autonomous municipalities and recently with *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils).<sup>2</sup>

The government’s response to this movement has had different phases and forms. These have ranged from a strictly military response to the aperture of political channels for negotiations which were suspended some years ago; from the acceptance that the Zapatistas’ demands are just,

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to accusations of manipulation by external interests; and from the characterisation of the Zapatista movement as merely local to the acceptance of the Zapatista's political authority to present their position at the National Congress Tribune in 2001.

During the four years from 1996 to 2000, when the dialogue between the government and the Zapatistas was ruptured, the principal response by the government to the Zapatistas' demands was to employ anti-insurgency measures, using scarce public resources to gain political control of the population. With changes in the national and the state governments in 2001, this approach was modified and repression is no longer the principal means of control exercised by the government. Now there are different initiatives from the government and some development programmes aimed, at least in their stated objectives, to respond to underlying causes of the rebellion. But from the Zapatistas' point of view, even these programmes are designed to undermine their resistance and to maintain control over the population.

### 3 Spaces for participation in resistance: the Zapatistas and autonomous municipalities

Since the Zapatista movement began in 1994, very important changes have occurred in cultural and political ideas at the local and regional level and different social actors have mobilised around their own demands. This includes those who identify themselves as Zapatistas, as well as other social organisations with their own sets of demands, who may agree with some Zapatista demands but do not consider themselves as a part of the Zapatista movement. But even those social groups that are more oriented towards finding solutions to immediate needs than to achieving more general political changes now have a different view of their rights. Nonetheless, there are important differences between these groups, demonstrated by their political views and positions on relations with the government; their notions about their rights; and the spaces, forms and objectives of their participation.

#### 3.1 Engagement with the government

One of the most important defining characteristics of different social actors in Chiapas is the kind of relationship they have with the government in terms of the acceptance or rejection of the development programmes established by the national and local

governments. Social movements in Chiapas take three main postures *vis-à-vis* engagement the government:

- Resistance. It is the Zapatista position to reject any aid, resource or programme from the government, until their demands for political change at the national level are achieved. This position is related to the creation of autonomous spaces (municipalities and good government councils) oriented towards the transformation of social relations through local spaces.
- Collaboration. This is the position that some social organisations that originally agreed with the Zapatistas' demands have adopted. They have decided to collaborate with the local government, to receive resources from official programmes, as long as this contributes to achieving their own interest and priorities.
- Receptiveness. Some organisations have taken the position that they will accept any governmental programme and aid, irrespective of any political consideration, without conditions and irrespective of the political implications of this aid.

#### 3.2 Spaces, forms and objectives of participation

As these different social groups have engaged with the government through regional development programmes and with the Zapatistas through local autonomous municipalities, some important features of the spaces and forms of participation in these radically different contexts have emerged. While there are some commonalities in the understanding of participation in these spaces, there are other important divergences.

Commonalities include a shared understanding of the meaning of participation as both a responsibility and a mechanism for increasing awareness. In both the autonomous municipal councils and the micro regional councils, there is an understanding that participation is a responsibility to the community. People assume these responsibilities without the possibility of remuneration, although participation can also lead to prestige. To assume responsibility within the community is an important cultural issue and it is seen as particularly important for young people and woman to participate. In both cases, participation has led to an increased awareness of the general situation in Chiapas, greater

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understanding about the collective, rather than individual, nature of problems and awareness that different kinds of actions (technical, organisational, political) are needed to solve them.

There are, however, important divergences in the space, form and objectives of participation in the autonomous spaces of the Zapatista movement and the 'invited' spaces of the Mexican government. One important aspect is the origin of participation and its limits in terms of who decides that participation is needed, for what and at what level. In the case of social movements in resistance to the government, the community decides the level of participation in terms of the priorities that they establish and actions are taken in agreement with real capacities and resources. These groups may accept assistance from external sources, but decisions (and the consequences of success or failure) are assumed by the Council or the Assembly. The collective interest is given more weight than the individual one, leading to some advantages in terms of more efficient use of resources. But there are limits to participation as a result of the political situation. In the context of the spaces for participation in governmental programmes, participation has been promoted by technocrats who do not just influence decisions, but also put limits on participation (such as by limiting the organisation's representation at the council). Even if some collective interests exist that could influence decisions, these may be rejected in order to facilitate resource allocation on an individual basis. The level of participation is also limited by insufficient information.

### 3.3 Rhythms of participation

Different time perspectives can be identified in these participation processes. Within the autonomous municipalities, there is a long-term perspective on participation. Participation is seen as a way to struggle for the guarantee of certain rights. Although everyone may not understand their participation as contributing to realising social, cultural and political rights, at least municipal authorities, commission members and the practitioners understand participation in those terms. In comparison, in the governmental programmes, the predominant time perspective is generally short term (from several months to one year). There are very few cases where practitioners consider the participatory space as a means to achieve the realisation of rights.

The rhythm of participation varies between created spaces within the autonomous municipalities and invited spaces within government programmes. In the first case, the rhythm is established by the community, with the knowledge of the time that they have to achieve their goals. In contrast, in governmental programmes the rhythm of participation is established in agreement with bureaucratic priorities that in most cases are not related to the people's conditions and needs. In the following sections, I examine in more detail the implications of these commonalities and differences for experiences of participation in spaces created within Zapatista-led autonomous municipalities and in invited spaces within government-initiated regional development programmes.

### 4 Popular spaces: Zapatistas and resistance through autonomous municipalities

Because the Zapatista movement's objectives imply a political position, the Zapatistas have established a parallel local governance structure. The posture of resistance within the Zapatista movement means that there is no relationship at all with the different levels of the Mexican government and with the other social organisations at the local level and this has important implications in terms of community and regional social life. The Zapatista movement and their resistance to the government is characterised by several features. It is an active position. In some sense it can be understood as the expression of participatory citizenship where people have to assume different responsibilities. Resistance is based principally on people's own capacities, although they receive some external support and collaboration. They act as collective agents (Cornwall 2002). Second, the movement is oriented to achieve different kinds of transformations at the local level. Actions are based on existing community resources, oriented to solve fundamental community needs, situated within a long-term perspective and geared toward realising social, political and cultural rights. This movement is oriented to advance their own view of development, including retaking control of lands taken during the rebellion and the colonisation, the creation of new settlements (including in the Biosphere Reserve) and the territorial conduct.

Collective space in a Zapatista community is the space where political decisions are made. Within

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the local autonomous municipalities established by the Zapatista movement, there are different ways and forms to participate: in the community Assembly, in the Autonomous Council and any of their Commissions, or in a specific function as a community *promoter* (advocate). There are several thousand people in each autonomous municipality settled in a highly dispersed pattern between 60 communities from farms, *ejidos* and other larger communities. The situation varies between autonomous municipalities, but the majority incorporate less than 50 per cent of the total population of their area. The relationship between the autonomous municipality and the rest of the population in the same geographical area varies from tacit acceptance of the autonomous authorities, to outright rejection of the autonomous municipalities and confrontation of the Zapatistas. The principal problems focus on agrarian issues and the autonomous authorities' decision to prohibit cutting timber from forests and the consumption of alcohol.

Beginning with the shift in the state government in 2001, different services (electricity, potable water, roads, vaccination and health care) have been offered to the communities and to the population even if they are not Zapatistas (i.e. aligned with the autonomous municipalities), but despite the difficult situation, the autonomous municipalities have refused all these services in keeping with their position of resistance. The autonomous municipalities believe that the government programmes are designed to control the population and undermine the Zapatista movement. The principal evidence of the use of official programmes for this purpose is the Cañadas Programme, which gave resources to paramilitary groups.<sup>3</sup> Another example is livestock projects, which give leverage to anti-Zapatista organisations to press for more land.<sup>4</sup>

The highest governmental authority is the Autonomous Council, which is composed of a president, secretary, treasurer and administrator. It incorporates different commissions (justice, land and territory, production, health, education) according to the municipality's priorities. Each commission has *promotores* who develop these activities at the local level. Municipalities are grouped into Zones. The municipal authorities' responsibilities are varied and include establishing a work plan for the municipality to solve daily problems, including assigning land to people and the organisation of collective work, the application

of traditional laws, the provision of education and health needs and the establishment of regulations on the use of natural resources. They do not have any relationship with the official Mexican government and they do not accept any kind of help or projects from governmental institutions, instead seeking to solve their own needs, using their own resources in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists and developing their own agenda in line with their political, social, cultural, economic and environmental priorities.<sup>5</sup>

The Assembly is the space of common identity, the place where a common identity is constructed and where important decisions regarding daily social life are taken. During the afternoon, after a hard day of work, the assembly is called. In most cases the meeting place includes some seats and on the wall some symbols: a Mexican flag, an image of the Guadalupe virgin, a red star and maybe symbols of unity, hope and resistance. The Assembly is also the space where local authorities inform people of their activities, community work is organised and responsibilities are assigned such as who will be in charge of the community store and who will undertake special tasks. Functions are assigned so that all families participate in some way. In the community assembly the division in the gender roles is clear. Historically, only the male head of family has participated in this space, but now women also participate in discussions. An adult man represents each family to discuss issues and make decisions, which are reached by consensus. Three women are chosen to represent all women and have the responsibility of informing other women about Assembly discussions and agreements.

The local community advocates are responsible for work in areas considered priorities by the autonomous municipalities, such as health, education, human rights, agro-ecology. Most practitioners are young men and women that are assigned by their communities to work on these areas. These practitioners are very important to building local and regional capacities. Their view about their functions and responsibilities and how they understand their community's rights is key.

Underlying these local political structures for participation are two elements that are fundamental to understanding social relations. One element is a normative system that underpins community life.

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Given the situation of resistance, the normative system is also a space to coordinate and communicate the priorities and expectations of the community and to express and perpetuate the resistance movement through discourses and practices. The other element is the Revolutionary Law for Zapatista Women.<sup>6</sup> One of the effects of this law is the prohibition of alcohol, which changes family and community relations that have been the cause of domestic violence.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to capture the overall effect of this law, but it has been fundamental to changing how men and women live together, enhancing women's position and offering the hope that the next generation will enjoy a better situation. Yet even with these changes, it is difficult for women to dramatically improve their lives.

### 5 Beyond autonomous municipalities: non-Zapatista social organisation in Chiapas

Across the region, a range of social organisations exist that have been active over many years in trying to find solutions to agrarian, economic and political problems. As a result of the political changes at the national and state level two years ago, a new agenda has been established and some organisations have decided to collaborate with government.

A combination of different factors has encouraged some people to abandon the Zapatista movement and their posture of resistance: the long time span of the movement; the difficulty of the economic situation; the relative changes in government's position, including the decrease in military presence in public areas; and most importantly the promise of some kind of aid from governmental programmes. Many people have cut their ties to autonomous municipalities, even though in some cases they accept some of the autonomous council's agreements and norms. In some cases, those who abandoned the Zapatista movement have joined organisations opposed to the Zapatistas, primarily because of land disputes where they do not accept the autonomous authorities' decisions.

These organisations have different positions on the governmental development programmes applied at the regional level. It is important to note, however, that almost all organisations, from the local to the regional level, oppose the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), for the same reasons that the Zapatistas oppose it. This is an important commonality even if there are differences on other issues.

### 6 Invited spaces for participation: regional government development programmes

Several governmental regional development programmes are being implemented in the Zapatistas' area of influence. Although they have different objectives and resources, all of them provide spaces for local participation. The most important of these are the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) and the Integral Programme for the Sustainable Development of the Lacandon Rainforest (PIDSS).

Two international programmes dominate the "invited spaces" of the region, with implications that connect local and global actors and institutions. The PPP and MBC are both initiatives that span the borders of Mexico and other Central American countries. The PPP is an international agreement created to promote investment, infrastructure and social, economic and human development. Questioned and rejected by numerous social actors, including the Zapatistas, it is seen by critics as part of a transnational geopolitical strategy to control the natural resources of the area and to exploit the local labour force, to the detriment of the indigenous population and has been a focus for mobilisation and opposition by a number of social groups in the region. The MBC, an international programme included in the PPP project, focuses on the protection of an environmental corridor that includes some Natural Protected Areas in Mexico and Central America. The global importance of the biodiversity in this area, its accelerated deterioration and lost resources are a common concern at the national and international level. One of the characteristics of the MBC is its proposal of involving local participation in the protection of biodiversity, but until now very little has been done towards it. International concern in sustainability is considered by some as a way to appropriate and control the natural resources and local knowledge of the area without respecting the rights of the population. People in general in the region have only minimal information about this programme. Community practitioners from social organisations agree with the objective of protecting biodiversity, but they do not accept external interference with their resources. MBC presence in the region is very limited to date.

The third significant programme in the region, the PIDSS, is worth examining more closely in terms

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of what it offers in terms of our analysis of different kinds of spaces for participation. The PPP has courted resistance and opposition; the MBC has been something about which few people have heard and little has been done, in terms of engaging local people. In the case of the PIDSS, a significant contrast is the publicity that has surrounded it and the resources that have been allocated to and through it for work at the community level.

The PIDSS is a highly ambitious development programme that focuses on social, economic and environmental issues. This programme is aimed at the area that is perceived as being under the Zapatistas' influence and where Zapatistas have created autonomous municipalities. This can be understood as an attempt to transform a contra-insurgency action to a regional development action based on local participation. The programme is established around four thematic axes:

- Human and social development
- Infrastructure for social development
- Productive development
- Environmental development

The PIDSS began in 2001 in a region that includes nine autonomous municipalities, with a population of approximately 383,000 inhabitants distributed in 2,349 communities and 34 micro-regional councils, including a number in the conflict zone where the autonomous municipalities are situated.<sup>8</sup>

Using a participative methodology, the government, through federal and state technocrats, has promoted participation at the community, micro-regional and municipal level. At the first level, representation is proportional to the size of the community. The planning unit is the micro-region. In every micro-region, a Council is formed with representatives of the communities and of the regional organisations. There is a collective coordination body, a horizontal structure formed of ten elected members from the micro-regional councils; half of them from the communities and half of them from regional organisations, in which community representation is given more importance. Representatives are unpaid. At the regional level, there is a Plenary Assembly (Special Subcommittee for the Rainforest Development) that is formed from representatives of every micro-regional council; not all the councils have

participated in this subcommittee.

Council regulations recognise the need to advance gender equality through requiring a certain number of women participants in the planning process. However, women's representation in the micro-regional councils has been minimal and especially so in the collective coordination body. The actual situation is worse in light of the negligible amount of resources dedicated towards solving women's needs. Furthermore, some of the projects that are presented as benefiting women are in fact aimed at family needs. Participation of social organisations in the micro-regional councils has been limited by bureaucratic decisions. For instance, the most important social organisation in the Chilon municipality, Yomlej, with almost 9,000 members in hundreds of communities, was not represented in the micro-regional Council, since their leaders were not aware of the programme. This is an important limitation since this organisation has a strong presence in the municipal government from where the resources will be assigned to the PIDSS.

Participation in this process actually refers to the planning phase, centred on the selection of a pre-defined group of proposals, with limitations on what is possible to do and what is not. The projects are defined in such a way that they promote individual rather than collective interests. This has negative effects on community unity. In some cases, participants try to agree on projects that would bring about general benefits. However, as resources are individually assigned, this means that assignments are small and more oriented towards solving immediate needs rather than developing more sustainable alternatives in the long term. The entire process is driven and in some cases controlled by government technocrats. They have the power to establish conditions on council agreements, on the kind of projects that can be carried out and even on who should be in the Council. In one case, for example, monthly meetings with participation from the community had taken place to conduct a diagnosis of the situation. But community members found that resources were being assigned that were not in agreement with what had been decided. Resources that had been assigned to the municipality were assigned using political criteria and only a third of the amount solicited was actually received. The situation was even worse considering that most of the resources were assigned to individual project activities that were already receiving aid from other

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government programmes, while some other good projects were not financed at all.

Brief as this consideration of regional “invited” spaces has been, it has highlighted a number of challenges for popular engagement with participatory processes that have their origins in state (or, as in the case of the PPP and MBC, supra-state) initiatives. Problems of representation, deliberation and consensus-building emerge at every level and stage. Social actors are faced with difficult dilemmas. On the one hand, they can, like the Zapatista movement, refuse to engage at all and seek their own popular spaces through which to pursue their own projects and their own governance. On the other, entry-points for participation in different kinds of institutions offer different political opportunities, some of which might be political dead-ends as legitimacy is given to institutions that serve to channel resources to bolster political patronage rather than meet the expressed needs of the general population. What is clear is that both popular and invited spaces are affected by power relations and the existence of interest groups at the local and micro-regional level. In a very complex political situation, the balance of power between different interest groups has many local variations and differences.

### 7 Conclusion

The different spaces for participation outlined in this article are distinguished by origin, objectives and practices, but principally by the different underlying ideas about politics, rights and values. The commonalities in values, a general awareness of human rights and a shared understanding of cultural and political issues between these spaces offer the possibility for mutual learning.

The Zapatistas’ autonomous municipalities are spaces designed to transform economic, cultural and political relations in order to construct a better future from the local level. This movement has also served to build local capacity and leadership to both transform and give new value to cultural identity. In contrast, participatory spaces within the government programmes are primarily instrumental. The objectives of regional development programmes are very ambitious: achieving social, economic, human and sustainable development. But the resources necessary to achieve these objectives are very limited. Given the regional situation, there is

a possibility that these spaces could be used to develop new capacities and leadership that empower local communities to create change and expand the possibilities for participation.

Even given the limitations of the participatory process in government programmes, they represent important changes in the relationship between government institutions and the inhabitants of the region. Some advances have been made in terms of considering different sectors’ needs and establishing an inclusive space in some development programmes, specifically the PIDSS. This is a new approach. But the evolution of this process will depend on different elements, from institutional to political changes, for success. Until now, the real effects of the participatory process on poverty and on opening up new alternatives for people are minimal, but improvements on issues such as nutrition, alcoholism, or environmental sustainability at the local level offer some prospects for hope. Public resources are no longer used to gain political control of the population as with past governments and more public resources are being used to solve some problems. But this is still a long way from a point where public policies and institutions address fundamental and underlying problems. The evidence of this gap is the continued use, since 1994, of important public resources to maintain in Chiapas, the strongest military presence of any region in Mexico.

This article has offered some preliminary reflections on the different forms of participation in Zapatista-led autonomous municipalities and governmental regional development programmes. By considering both the divergences and commonalities between participation in these very different spaces, some insights emerge about how participation can be used to achieve change. What emerges from this analysis is the extent to which the different logics that give rise to the shape participation can take in these different spaces offers very different possibilities for and visions of, development. While it is easier to answer those voices that demand responses to local and immediate needs, reflection on the limitations of instrumental participation underlines the need to respond to the voices that are calling for important political changes that will help Mexican society become more multicultural and diverse. Only then can the promise of participation be realised.

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**Notes**

1. The principal indigenous groups in the region are *Tzeltales*, *Tzotziles*, *Tojolabales*, *Ch'oles* and *Lacandonas*.
2. These were recently created by the Zapatistas to coordinate activities at a regional level. They include several autonomous municipalities and are oriented to establish better coordination for the collaboration that they get from solidarity groups (for health, education or productive projects). They rotate responsibility for coordination, with representation of all the autonomous municipalities included at every Council.
3. This programme was eliminated when the government changed in 2001.
4. Some organisations have received financing to develop cattle projects (even in the Biosphere Reserve) and they press for land and confront the Zapatista communities.
5. Some confrontations have even involved guns. Some of the members of these organisations used to be part of the Zapatista movement and they have left the movement in the last few years. For the Zapatista authorities these actions are considered as part of a contra-insurgency strategy.
6. *Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres Zapatistas*.
7. This prohibition is established in two articles of the law: 8, 22.
8. During 2001, 67 million pesos (around \$7 million) were assigned to the programme: 80 per cent was for immediate needs and 20 per cent for basic infrastructure (potable water, electricity, etc.).

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