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Organized Coffee Producers: Mitigating Negative Impacts of Outmigration in Oaxaca, Mexico

Josefina Aranda Bezaury

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Oaxaca is not just a political unit but a land of diverse traditions and languages, characterized by a difficult landscape with 3 major mountain ranges and a history of colonization and exploitation. These components make Oaxaca a special place in Mexico, where diversity constitutes a form of wealth that contrasts with the conditions of poverty and marginality in which its population lives. Today Oaxaca is considered the second poorest state in Mexico. Economic hardship and social inequality are important factors that trigger migration. Oaxaca has a long tradition

of outmigration dating back to the early 1900s. But outmigration has increased so dramatically in recent decades that almost half of the Oaxacan population have become permanent or temporary residents of the Mexico City metropolitan area, the northern states of Mexico, or the United States. The present article describes the experience of an Oaxacan coffee producers' organization and its members' efforts to offer alternatives to outmigration and improve their livelihoods in their mountain environment and move towards greater gender equality.



Oaxaca: poverty-prone and characterized by high outmigration

Oaxaca was colonized by the Spanish 5 centuries ago; the consequences of this colonization can still be seen today. As in other parts of Mexico, Indian communities, in a long-term process, moved their settlements to the most inaccessible (ie mountainous) parts of their territory—the Sierra Madre del Sur, Sierra de Oaxaca, and Sierra Atravesada—as a way to resist the Spanish elite and maintain their cultures. Some authors have called these areas Refugee Regions.

Although the Mexican state has developed many different policies relating to Indian populations, today the least development, the worst poverty indices, and the most inequitable social relations are found in the Mexican states of the South: Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. For example, Oaxaca has the highest rates of maternal and child mortality. By contrast with its natural and cultural wealth, 30% of the Oaxacan population lives in communities which the Mexican state considers very highly marginalized.

Emigration from Oaxaca is deeply rooted as a survival strategy. The phenomenon has different aspects, some positive and some negative. On the one hand, it can be said that emigration, especially to the USA, is very risky, as lives are lost every day while people are trying to cross the border (news reports claimed that 360 people died last year). On the other hand, substantial remittances from emigrants are invested in Oaxaca, not only for daily needs but also for community infrastructure and production.

The hardships faced by indigenous women

Women in Oaxaca are hit hardest by poverty and emigration. Although women participate in all fundamental aspects of social reproduction and production, working 16 to 17 hours a day, there is very little recognition of their contribution (Figure 1). In 1995, the *Beijing Report* of the Fourth World Conference on Women noted the hardships of domestic labor for women in Oaxaca, which is performed under very difficult conditions: 51% of the houses have no sealed floor, 70% are without sewage connections, 41% without water, and 24% without electrical power.

Women have traditionally worked in coffee production as part of the family productive unit; but in recent years, after

FIGURE 1 Women building a chicken coop. (Photo by CEPCO Technical Assistance Team)





FIGURE 2 A local coffee producer tests the quality of coffee, known to be excellent in Oaxaca state. (Photo by CEPCO Technical Assistance Team)

a long crisis period in coffee prices, apart from being household heads owing primarily to the outmigration of men, they became more intensely involved in the production process, to avoid having to pay laborers for harvesting. The “Cafetalero census” showed a significant increase in the participation of women: in 1999 they accounted for 10% and in 2005 for 35% of all producers in Oaxaca.

The twofold potential of coffee production

Oaxaca is known for the production of excellent coffee (Figure 2), but the farmers who produce it have a precarious existence. Coffee cultivation began in Oaxaca at the end of the 19th century, and today the state ranks second in Mexico for production, land cultivated, and number of families who depend directly on the income they generate from coffee production. More than 58,000 families in 771 communities cultivate 180,280 ha of coffee in Oaxaca. For many years producers sought no other source of livelihood outside their communities, as a great part of their income was related to coffee.

The production of coffee shaded by forest is not only important in economic terms; it also provides crucial ecosystem services. Coffee grown on steep hillsides prevents soil erosion that would otherwise occur due to subsistence agriculture. Recent research shows that shade coffee plantations in themselves are an excellent habitat for migratory birds and other small animals, creating an area with one of the highest levels of biological diversity in Mexico (Figure 3).

The indigenous production system favors sustainable shade coffee because more than 90% of the coffee-growing area is cultivated by Indian producers who own less than 5 ha. Moreover, coffee is produced in the context of a *campesino* (peasant) household economy characterized by insufficient food production and diversified income sources, coffee as the main cash crop, family members as laborers, migration, government support for agricultural commodities, domestic sales (garden production), etc. Coffee producers in Oaxaca have developed a strong communitarian spirit in their work and in terms of organization.

Coffee producers' organizations and the struggle for a better life

In the late 1980s, the steep drop in coffee prices and neo-liberal economic policies led many small farmers to get organized in cooperatives and pool their resources to produce coffee for export. To enter international markets, they often built their own processing centers or purchased those abandoned by the Mexican government's official coffee agency following the crash in coffee prices on the international market. These cooperatives pursued organic certification and fair trade registration in order to provide small coffee farmers with a more profitable product and also keep alive a tradition of harmony with the forest and the land.

The Coordinadora Estatal de Productores de Café de Oaxaca (CEPCO: Coffee Growers' Association of Oaxaca) emerged from this process, and it has been working on behalf of indigenous small-scale farmers ever since. For more than 17 years, CEPCO has represented the

largest network of coffee cooperatives in Oaxaca. It is an independent statewide federation of coffee cooperatives in Oaxaca, handling coffee from 14,000 producers. It is fully owned and controlled by the members of the 34 regional cooperatives that comprise it. The vast majority of the owner-members are from indigenous communities (95%) or small *mestizo* (mixed-heritage) villages in the Oaxaca highlands. Although CEPSCO focuses on producing coffee, the organization has also played a role in Mexico's *campesino* movement: it has struggled against the historical legacy imposed on indigenous communities and developed into an organization with many roles, addressing the multiple needs of its membership: social welfare, justice, and democracy.

Equality and autonomy: basic principles

In relation to its mission statement, "To promote and implement programs for the integral development of coffee-producing families (struggle for better living)," CEPSCO is working to develop better trading conditions for small farmers, improve coffee quality, production, and processing techniques, increase access to credit for all members, and—equally important—develop programs designed to improve the social and economic wellbeing of women, their families, and communities. Since its founding, CEPSCO has developed according to 4 basic principles:

- **Autonomy** for the members of regional organizations;
- **Democracy** in decision-making;
- **Pluralism** regarding political, ideological, and religious orientation;
- **Transparency** in resource management.

CEPSCO believes that without these principles it would be impossible to achieve the following objectives of the organization: 1) influence governmental agencies and offices by demanding equitable and just development policies based on the realities faced by small coffee producers (eg seek support for improving production, accessing markets, and developing technical and financial skills); 2) promote and develop a democratic culture in communities and organizations;

3) promote social consciousness among members; and 4) develop equal participation of *campesino* women in organizational decision-making and increase access to capital for production, health, gender equity, etc. In brief, the strength and vitality of this coffee organization come from the grassroots organizations that were established at regional and state levels, and from their capacity to generate different answers to external changes.

Another important role played by coffee organizations is their contribution to regulating coffee prices in the communities. In the absence of organizations, selling conditions and prices are fixed by transnational companies through local shops and traditional middlemen. In this sense the creation of economic mechanisms that support small coffee producers add value at various steps in the production process. For example, the ownership of a credit union, micro credit programs, two processing facilities (*beneficios secos*) and local cafeterias is very important for success in meeting objectives.

Also, promoting organic agriculture and crop diversification were significant in developing a comprehensive marketing strategy that links on-the-ground attention to environmental sustainability with social and economic aspects. This is part of an effort to add value to coffee exports through labeling (organic, fair trade, sustainable, shade, bird friendly, etc), and receive higher prices, thus helping to avoid outmigration as the only way to survive.

FIGURE 3 Shade coffee is not only an economic good; it also provides important ecosystem services, such as biodiversity. (Photo by CEPSCO Technical Assistance Team)



Women's organizations: new citizenship

Peasant women's organizations arose in Oaxaca (and in most of Mexico) with 4 different objectives:

1. **Survival:** projects aimed at confronting permanent crisis and extreme poverty, eg through small-scale vegetable production, stove installation, etc. The focus is on immediate survival for women and their families.
2. **Improved infrastructure:** to solve common problems linked, for instance, to the lack of water supply and sewage, or to provide a maize mill to produce tortillas.
3. **Production:** projects aimed at establishing nurseries and developing organic farms and small family businesses, etc.
4. **Addressing gender relations:** confronting subordinate relationships between men and women.

Oaxaca's experience shows that measures to meet these different objectives have been developed in an integrative way during the last 10 years. In relation to survival, for instance, food insecurity has been confronted and infrastructure improved for better living conditions. Productive projects have a difficult aim: to stabilize employment and income. Lastly, as women get organized to confront unequal gender relations, they are seeking a major change in domestic, communitarian, and organizational relations (see Box).

Women's organizations in Oaxaca often work within larger, mixed organizations composed of women and men. This is the case with coffee and migrant organizations, and some forest groups. Among the most important changes affecting women in recent years as a result of their organizing experiences in CEPCO are significant recognition by men of women's domestic, productive, and organizing efforts; strengthening of all larger and mixed organizations as a result of incorporating the demands of peasant women; more participation by women in assemblies of all kinds (town, municipal, organi-

Opinions expressed at women's meetings

"I'm a community technician; I've been learning and working with CEPCO for 3 years. I carry out all the obligations in my *cargo* (post). For example, I have learned to vaccinate and combat bloodsuckers in lambs, to heal chicken, to prepare organic manure, to produce organic legumes for consumption, etc. And I teach all my associates to do these things. Some of them take advantage of this, some don't. Nevertheless, I always teach them and practice all I've been learning. I teach in my local language because I want them to make a better living than I have."

"Before I was very shy; I didn't get to know any women outside my community, and I didn't travel, even to nearby places. Now I go to Oaxaca City to learn, and I can speak my own language and Spanish with greater fluency. I feel all the producers in CEPCO are part of my family."

"Although I'm not young (55), I can still be a better person and learn from more training. I can take advantage of working together with other men and women, for example in organic coffee production I have better yields and my land is more productive."

zation), in formal politics, and in traditional social organizations such as the *cargo* system (expenditure of wealth to sponsor religious fiestas in order to accumulate prestige within one's community) and *tequio* (obligatory, uncompensated communal work); increased self-confidence: "we have more dignity;" "we lost our fears;" "we are happy to know our rights as women;" but also increased conflict in households and communities depending on who performs household chores.

The new millennium: threats and opportunities for coffee producers

As mentioned above, coffee constitutes the core of all social and economic life in the regions where it is produced. All other projects developed by organizations, such as micro credits, women's programs, coffee diversification, etc, are affected by coffee prices. In crisis periods social and economic depression are apparent, but in periods when prices are maintained, coffee production can help ensure livelihoods.

FIGURE 4 Women trained by CEPCO to develop coffee plants in a nursery—the first step in coffee production. Trained women have greater self-esteem. (Photo by CEPCO Technical Assistance Team)

At present Oaxacan coffee producers are faced with major threats, especially very low prices. Especially when coffee prices do not cover the costs of production, smallholder farmers face increased pressure to migrate to the United States or to big cities in Mexico, or to convert their coffee fields to some other use. Although exact information is lacking, some researchers have recently been looking into the relations between coffee crises, migration, and coffee producers' organizations. In addition, price crashes pose a serious threat to organizations such as CEPCO, limiting their ability to provide core programs such as micro credit, women's programs, coffee diversification, etc.

Even in periods of serious price crises, however, CEPCO sees a ray of hope for small coffee producers. Specifically, they work with their members to:

- *Confront crises collectively:* drawing on the well of social capital that CEPCO has created over the past 17 years, member organizations are working to develop collective actions to confront crises, with the help of special programs from the state, grants, etc. The goal is to avoid individual or family responses such as migration or withdrawal from coffee production, which cause severe disruptions for coffee-growing households and families, as well as for local agro-ecological systems, and, most of all, the organizational process.
- *Support the cultural and biological diversity of Oaxaca, which today represents the most important resource of its people:* this diversity is the basis for a type of alternative development to the homogenized model imposed from above and outside, which has failed to recognize diversity



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as a resource for building a more equitable society.

- *Expand markets for coffee grown by small producers:* one area of potential growth is organic, shade-grown coffee (Figure 4). Nearly all CEPCO coffees are grown under a shaded overstorey, with little or no chemical input. This production method provides good habitats for birds and insects and may serve as a biological corridor, allowing larger animals to move between natural areas. Fair trade labeling represents another market opportunity and one that offers CEPCO producers the chance to connect with solidarity-minded consumers in the United States and Europe.

Finally, CEPCO dreams of continuing to confront challenges and goals, such as taking decisions democratically while continuing to be competitive in the market, confronting poverty with a conservation perspective, and building more equal gender relations in Indian communities. All of these are aspects that can have a positive, mitigating impact on outmigration.

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