

**Chiapas Civil Society Organizations:  
Cultural Resistance and Economic Alternatives  
Through Fair Trade Cooperatives and International Networks.**

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**Abstract:**

*The neo-Zapatista movement of Chiapas, Mexico, is a well-known entity in Latin America and around the world. Since the 1994 rebellion organized by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), Chiapas has been associated with indigenous resistance against imposed neoliberal policies and their strong claim for the recognition of indigenous rights and cultures. What is less known is the crucial role that Chiapas civil society organizations (CSOs) have within the neozapatista resistance movement and in the creation of effective and sustainable economic alternatives. Indigenous civil society organizations, women cooperatives and fair trade international networks offer important lessons for other Latin American CSOs engaged in inter-cultural and international collaborative relationships to promote democracy, peace, justice and dignity. This paper focuses on the multicultural collaborative dialogues of the Civil Society Las Abejas (The Bees), the Fair Trade and Organic Coffee Cooperative Maya Vinic and the Women Artisan Cooperative Kinal Antzetik with European and American based non-profit organizations, universities, and church-based groups. Since the December 1997 Acteal paramilitary massacre of innocent women and children members of Las Abejas, numerous organizations and cooperatives have been formed as a way to sustain their livelihood and their struggle of resistance. By using preexisting inter-organizational and international social networks, Chiapas CSOs were able to create new partnerships to sell their products and share their messages. The paper offers an overview of the methods and strategies successfully adopted by Chiapas CSOs in dialogue with US and EU CSOs. Through a network analysis method, the paper shows how Las Abejas, Maya Vinic and Kinal Antzetik were able to expand pre-existing local networks into new inter-regional and global networks of solidarity. These Chiapas CSOs demonstrate how indigenous identities combined with international solidarity can produce sustainable alternatives to economic globalization and a global civil society founded on democracy and peace with justice and dignity.*

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## **The Indigenous Civil Society in the Mexican Context**

Civil society organizations, particularly in their configurations as Asociaciones Civiles (AC) and Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a unique historical significance for Mexico. In the past 20 years, but more evidently since the 1994 Zapatista uprising, civil society and NGOs have become very important agents for the reformulation of how cultures and economies can clash and/or dialogue at the state and national level.

*Asociaciones políticas* are also very important in the Mexican context. They are groups organized to participate in the dissemination of ideas on some aspect of politics. They are very close to NGOs, but they are recognized by the state. Indigenous organizations, particularly visible after the *Marcia de los Colores de La Tierra* in 2001, are another fundamental actor that, with the growing influence of NGOs in Mexican political and social life, are challenging and steadily reformulating the complex relations between the state and civil society.

A number of powerful NGOs emerged during the 1990s and formed alliances and partnerships with indigenous civil society organizations sympathizing with the political and social demands Ejercity Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in the southernmost state of Mexico, Chiapas. Among these organizations are Alianza Cívica (civic alliance, which was supported by the United Nations), the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos (Mexican academy of human rights), Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia (Conference of civil organizations for democracy), Acuerdo Nacional por la Democracia (National accord for democracy), Movimiento Ciudadano por la Democracia (Citizens' movement for democracy), Consejo por la Democracia (Council for democracy), and the Fundación Arturo Rosenbluth (Arturo Rosenbluth

foundation). Before 1994 these organizations, all formed by citizens, not political parties, played a very important role in denouncing irregularities in political elections. After 1994, their actions and focus aligned with the indigenous struggle for the constitutional recognition of their rights and culture. They also aligned their actions in dialogue with the growing international solidarity of foreign and international NGOs attracted by the messages of Subcomandante Marcos and by the appeals of solidarity from Bishop Samuel Ruiz and the FrayBa Human Rights Center.

Because of its geographical and cultural identity, Chiapas is often considered closer to Central America than the rest of Mexico. Yet, the Mexican context is very important for Chiapas civil society organizations that continue to seek recognition from the Mexican government and continue to form coalitions with other Mexican indigenous organizations. Chiapas indigenous civil society organizations sympathizing with the Zapatista demands for autonomy do not seek independence from Mexico. Rather, they are proud of their Mexican identity but they cannot renounce their even stronger indigenous identities. In other words, the struggle is for recognition, the recognition of their collective and indigenous way of life. The ongoing Chiapas-Mexico struggle is a positive impulse in the globalizing process for Mexico and other struggles where indigenous identities need to be recognized within national and global dominant identities and cultures.

### **NGOs and CSOs in the Chiapas Context**

Chiapas is the perfect place for understanding the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). During the last 30 years, Chiapas indigenous communities have been forming new organizations promoting social

justice, development, human rights, education and women rights among other important purposes (Frost 2002). Such organizations have benefited from collaborating with Mexican and international NGOs. The intensity and kind of presence of NGOs in the Highlands and Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas is recognizable in three periods before Zapatista rebellion in 1994 and after the 2000 presidential elections (Vargas Cetina and Palomo Infante 2002).

The Chiapas context before 1994 was characterized by the work of numerous indigenous organizations working for the promotion of social justice in their communities, regions and counties. The 1974 Indigenous Congress marks the beginning of radical peasant and indigenous movements in Chiapas. The conference, initially organized for commemorating the sixteenth century champion of indigenous rights, Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, became an organizational genesis for the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolabal indigenous communities. Thanks to prophetic leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the already 1,000 catechists were instrumental translators, communicators and animators for the preparation, logistics and outcomes of the congress. Historians and agronomists, among other experts, were invited by the San Cristobal de Las Casas Diocese to teach courses on Mexican history, agrarian law and economics to indigenous communities and newly formed organizations. The effects of the congress were extraordinary as communities were asked to reflect on their socio-economic situations and formulate specific demands to government representatives. It was a grassroots convention designed and prepared by indigenous people themselves. Unlike the government-sponsored indigenous and peasant organizations, the congress demonstrated the effectiveness of the bottom-up methodology adopted by the progressive Catholic

Church in Chiapas. This method of organization, leadership and decision making was employed by most non-governmental and civil society organizations. In the two decades following the 1974 event, the leadership and methodology of the Catholic Church combined with the indigenous collective wisdom and the pre-existing revolutionary ideologies to form what was later recognized as the EZLN. The relevance of the neo-Zapatistas and of other indigenous organizations became evident in 1992 as more than 10,000 representatives marched into the streets of San Cristobal de Las Casas, protesting 500 years of oppression of indigenous people.

The presence of NGOs, particularly international NGOs, dramatically increased after the 1994 Zapatista rebellion. As the Mexican government sent heavy military presence to repress the poorly armed Zapatista organization, Bishop Samuel Ruiz and supporters of the Zapatista demands, launched an appeal to the international community to come to Chiapas in defense of indigenous communities and prevent silent massacres and systematic violations of human rights. Chiapas, bordering with Guatemala, was very familiar with the brutal side of low-intensity warfare and the effects of military and paramilitary repression on families, communities and organizations. The effective use of media, particularly of email and the Internet, prevented Chiapas from replicating the tragedies that occurred in Guatemala during the 1980s. Various Mexican and foreign NGOs came to Chiapas, establishing offices, implementing projects and fostering solidarity with Zapatista organizations and civil society organizations sympathizing with the Zapatista demands. The interests of these organizations spanned from human rights, women equality, inter-cultural communication, autonomous education and sustainable development. Many NGOs organized delegations, promoting international solidarity,

transnational advocacy and exchange of information. Many of these NGOs had an office in Chiapas, most commonly in San Cristobal de Las Casas, and ran a number of projects, published reports and continued their collaboration with Chiapas indigenous organizations. Human rights observers have been an integral part of their work. Mostly coordinated by Enlace Civil and the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center, the role of human rights observers has been essential for human rights prevention, documentation and training. DePaul University has been one of the instrumental players in empowering the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center in delivering effective human rights training to foreign observers and indigenous promoters.

The presence of NGOs in Chiapas began diminishing after the year 2000. Three major political, social and economic factors contributed to these changes. The presidential election of Vicente Fox, of the National Action Party (PAN) signed the end of more than 70 years of domination of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The politics of President Fox slightly changed the previous heavy military confrontation between the Mexican Army and the EZLN. He released most EZLN political prisoners, eliminated a few Mexican camps among indigenous communities but partly supported the Indigenous Congress' request for the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and cultures. In his campaign for the promotion of free markets in Mexico, President Fox constantly portrayed the relation with the EZLN as “dialogical” and the conflict in Chiapas as “solved.” His optimistic portraits of Chiapas, in addition to producing confidence in foreign investors, made board and supporters of international NGOs view Chiapas as less of an international priority than other conflicts around the world. This optimistic view existed at the state level as well. The election of Pablo Salazar as Chiapas

Governor, instilled a sense of hope on Chiapas based NGOs. Governor Salazar was elected as candidate of an opposition coalition organized by the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Numerous NGOs leaders eventually ended up working in state government offices or collaborating in one of their projects. The work and sustainability of the NGOs' projects became even more complicated as the Zapatista demands were ignored, watered-down and manipulated by complex political powers. The conflict in Chiapas has become difficult to discern. Neither the actors nor the context of the struggle were so clearly defined, as it was evident during the massive deployment of military power. After these many years, Zapatista communities showed "resistance fatigue." The EZLN leadership needed to make some structural changes to avoid corruption and infiltrations. They formed the caracoles and de-centralized the management of EZLN-NGOs relationships. Although these changes were necessary steps for the proper administration of autonomous Zapatista communities, they also aggravated many NGOs relationships. The real battle, however, was fought at the economic level. As the Mexican Red Cross interrupted their aid to the refugee camps of Chiapas and many NGOs redirected their financial assistance to the Middle East or other conflicting regions, the Chiapas based organizations began facing serious financial problems. In many cases this forced the organizations to change their strategies, close programs or even terminate their presence in Chiapas. Indigenous organizations were also deeply affected by these financial changes. They continued to volunteer for their leadership services while earning very little from their coffee and corn harvests. International presence diminished also in connection with the retirement of the charismatic leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz in January 2000. Many ecumenical programs and religious based initiatives did not continue

with the new Church leadership. In consequence, numerous NGOs diminished their presence and interest in Chiapas. Yet, Chiapas civil society organizations has been a fundamental step in shaping collective action in Central and Latin American civil society. In spite the disappearance of Chiapas from newspaper headlines, their ideals, courage, methods and context continue shaping the development of global civil society (see: Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2005, Baker and Chandler 2005, Chandler 2004).

### **Civil Society and the Zapatista Movement**

On October 12, 1992 numerous Mayan communities prayed and fasted remembering 500 years of indigenous resistance to oppression and slavery. Others joined the anti-Columbus day march in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. About 9,000 Maya descendant Tzotziles and Tzeltales marched on the streets protesting ethnic discrimination and political marginalization of indigenous people. Many protestors came from the Lacandon jungle and identified themselves as members of a recently founded radical organization called *Alianza Nacional Campesina Independiente Emiliano Zapata* (ANCIEZ) whose members were the majority of protestors and who later joined the EZLN (Ouweneel 1996). The increasing economic and ethnic marginalization experienced by Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Choles and Tojolabales indigenous communities of Chiapas encouraged mobilization and the search for alternative political programs (Chase 2002).

Political scientist Neil Harvey observes that the neozapatista cry of *Ya Basta* was in fact a call for solidarity for all those indigenous people and *mestizos* who said, “Enough is Enough!” of economic impositions and cultural discriminations (Harvey 1998). Nevertheless, we need to focus our attention on the already emerging

consciousness raising processes among peasant, indigenous, and women organizations of the Lacandon and Highlands regions of Chiapas. The strength of the EZLN rebellion, therefore, lies less in their military resources and revolutionary programs and more in the revelation and coalition of popular discontent of excluded sectors of the Mexican (and international) civil society (Womack 1999, 44).

The leadership of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, also known as the CCRI-CG, surprised the international community by proclaiming a red-alert on June 20, 2005. The comandantes ordered the interruption of the relation with the civil society and the retreat of the EZLN representatives from the Caracoles, the recently created structure following the autonomous governing role of the five Aguascalientes constituted after the 1994 uprising (Gonzales Casanova 2003). The caracoles represents a significant step of the EZLN to transition itself and the Zapatista movement from an armed resistance organization into a civil society movement fostering indigenous autonomy and participatory democracy with justice and dignity. Many have argued that the EZLN, although created and structured as an armed guerrilla organization has functioned, since the signing of the Cathedral peace accord, as a catalyst for the growing global civil society movements. National and international NGOs came to Chiapas to express their solidarity with the indigenous communities and prevent military and paramilitary violations of human rights. But they came also to learn from this remote region and ancient people the art of resistance to conquest and domination. The evolution and somehow the shifts in language used in the *Declaraciones de La Selva Lacandona* show how the EZLN seeks and promote active civil society participation at the local, national and international level. It also shows how the true face of the Zapatista movement which

is shaped by the numerous indigenous civil society organizations and by national and international NGOs.

Zapatista autonomous communities usually do not participate in political elections. Some of these bases, as in the case of the case of Polho in the municipality of San Pedro Chenalo, continue their resistance and firm opposition to military and government authorities by remaining in the refugee camp and not returning to their original communities. Civil society organizations, instead, have a different stand regarding political participation through the electoral system. Although they are skeptical about political leaders, they also consider active political participation as a positive way to seek societal change.

### **Indigenous Civil Society Organizations (ICSOs)**

Indigenous civil society organizations in Chiapas have been a growing presence in the Mexican, Zapatista and international context. The following three case studies of the Civil Society Las Abejas, the Fair Trade Cooperative Maya Vinic and the women cooperative Kinal Ansetik offer a brief but significant overview of the relationship between indigenous identities, organizational capacity and the methods used in collective actions. Although Chiapas ICSOs vary in their operational focuses, cultural identities and organizational missions, they all reflect some common lessons due to their history, shared passion and persistent struggle.

#### **The Civil Society Las Abejas**

The *Sociedad Civil Las Abejas* emerged in 1992 as a collective response to land conflict and political injustice. Numerous representatives from 22 communities gathered in Tzajalchen, in the municipality of Chenalhó and formed a coalition to defend a

woman's right to own land. The previous month, Agustín Hernández López declared that he did not want to share 120 hectares of inherited land with his two sisters, Catarina and María. His argument was that 'as women' they did not have any rights to land (Tavanti 2003; Hidalgo 1998). As is typical with disagreements in this indigenous community, members of the community gathered to examine the quarrel. The Tzanembolom community decided to divide the land into three equal parts, giving justice and equal rights to all the siblings. The brother, in disagreement with the community decision organized an armed group, kidnapped his two sisters and their families and began assaulting the coalition supporting his sister's rights. Eventually, six innocent indigenous representatives of this coalition were unjustly arrested by the police. On the face of such injustice, indigenous representatives mobilized their communities and then went marching and protesting at the Cereso Jails in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Thinking about a name for this newly organized group, they chose the image of *Abejas* (bees) to symbolize their collective identity and actions directed toward the defense of the rights of the little ones and toward sharing the fruit of their work equally with everyone (Tavanti 2003).

Las Abejas is a civil society that, similarly to numerous other indigenous organizations emerged from the Church's social work and from political movements (Cleary and Steigenga 2004). About 90 percent of the members of Las Abejas identify themselves with the progressive side of the Catholic Church. Now emeritus Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, in his 40 years of work among the indigenous communities of Chiapas, is the leader that best characterizes how the Church's role to promote consciousness, social movements and indigenous organizations. Inspired by the liberation

theologies of the 1960s and 1970s, Bishop Ruiz promoted a *pastorale* geared toward the eradication of social, political, economic, but also cultural and religious forms of oppression against indigenous populations. Tatik Samuel, or “father”, as the Maya descendants of Chiapas prefer to call him, followed 16<sup>th</sup> century indigenous rights defender Fay Bartolome de Las Casas. The events surrounding the 1974 Indigenous Congress, commemorating the historical figure of Fray Bartolome, gave the opportunity to indigenous communities to refocus on their identity, their rights, their dignity, and most of all their ability to organize and resist oppression. *Las Abejas* as an organization most clearly reflects not only the search for identity, but also the recuperation of their right to have an identity. Its constitution resulted from numerous opportunities created among Tzotzil-Christian communities as the diocese began respecting indigenous cultures, expansion of the role of the laity and promoting a less hierarchical church

By convening indigenous people from different parts of Chiapas, with different languages, customs and traditions, the 1974 Indigenous Congress encouraged the formation of bridges of dialogue across diverse social contexts and cultural identities. Similar problems and common needs for change were recognized to be the main preoccupations of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, Tojolabal, Zoque and Lacandon people. The sharing of local struggles helped to establish channels of ongoing communication and to form coalitions for collective resistance. Also, the Congress gave to non-Indian people of Chiapas and Mexico incontrovertible proof that indigenous communities are able to organize, share awareness and find unity even across language, ethnic and cultural differences. Clearly, the indigenous experience of analyzing their situations and expressing focused demands laid the groundwork for the creation of communication

networks and community mobilization later recognized in the *Las Abejas* and EZLN organizations. In the aftermath of the congress, numerous indigenous organizations emerged representing the same basic demands for land, education, health services, work and just commerce (Benjamin 1996).

Las Abejas is an organization sympathizing with the EZLN, supporting the Zapatista demands for indigenous rights and culture, but also distinguishing themselves for their Christian-based active nonviolent resistance. During the past few years the international community did not pay much attention to the Zapatista struggle and the activities of indigenous organizations in Chiapas. Yet the Zapatista movement is very active through its various organizational expressions of local activism and global networks. They continue organizing resistance in their communities and the international human rights observers maintain their presence and support. Perhaps, to understand the relevance of the Zapatista movement, we should pay attention to the inherent relationship between the EZLN rebellion, the *Las Abejas* resistance and the intensifying networks with national and international nongovernmental organizations. Although *Las Abejas* is a small indigenous organization, it represents very well the indigenous oppositional movement rooted in 510 years of experience in resistance. In addition, *Las Abejas* characterizes the growing relevance of civil society at local, regional and global levels.

### **The Fair Trade Coffee Cooperative Maya Vinic**

While in the refugee camps of Chenalho, Las Abejas wanted to harvest their coffee in spite of the threats of armed paramilitary groups, mostly anti-Zapatistas and PRI sympathizers. Thanks to presence of numerous Mexican and international human rights observers coordinated by the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center,

members of Las Abejas succeeded in accessing their *cafetales* and peacefully harvesting their coffee. As they returned home with their coffee beans, they experienced another threat. That is, the economic threat of the low coffee prices and the ongoing exploitation of coyotes, or mediators in the commercialization of green coffee. In 1999 they decided to form a cooperative of coffee producers. The cooperative addressed two important problems individual producers faced with the coyotes; illiteracy and storage problems. The coyotes manipulated the weight and payment of coffee to individual producers and profited from the lack of storage capacity. The cooperative soon became a visible sign of hope, not only for Las Abejas but for numerous other indigenous coffee producers who needed an organization of civil society. Pre-existing coffee cooperatives like Majomut or Mut Vitz were controlled by Priistas or Zapatistas. The highlands of Chiapas needed a cooperative that would welcome representatives of civil society organizations. Maya Vinic does not consider itself a “politically neutral” organization. Their members and leaders believe that the Chiapas struggle for economic sustainability and cultural resistance passes also through and structure and the operation of a coffee cooperative. And yet, they are more inclusive in their membership and maintain a dialogue with other coffee cooperatives and producers.

On December 11, 2001, *Las Abejas* received the prestigious annual Human Rights Award of the French Republic. The recognition, presented by French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin to *Las Abejas*’ representatives in Paris, was directed to the organization for their work in defense of the cultural identity of the indigenous people of Mexico. They recognized *Las Abejas* women for their courageous works of resistance for the construction of peace with justice and dignity. But most of all, *Las Abejas* received this

award for their courage to create Maya Vinic in the aftermath of the Acteal massacre. In a climate of violence, tension and grief for the massacre of 45 innocent indigenous women, children and men, Las Abejas did not respond to violence with violence. They did not choose to adopt a resistance strategy of isolation. Instead they built on the international networks acquired after the massacre and began expanding their networks for selling coffee and becoming more sustainable. There is speculation that the Acteal massacre was planned in December to interfere with the coffee harvest. Many paramilitaries and PRI supporters benefited both economically and politically, at the cost of the Abejas members who were too terrified to go out and harvest their coffee that year. The creation of the Maya Vinic cooperative was an attempt to channel their products toward alternative markets such as those of fair trade and organic products.

Fair prices are a fundamental principle in the Fair trade alternative. Yet, the other 6 principles monitored and promoted by the German-based Fair-trade Labeling Organization International (FLO) guarantee that cooperatives work toward economic and social sustainability. According to the Maya Vinic president, the cooperative gives people the opportunity to maintain their cultural identity by doing what they have always done and to make a living by doing it. The cooperative clearly benefits economic sustainability for indigenous communities and Chiapas civil society organizations that would not have the means necessary to survive. Members of Maya Vinic know that the real struggle in Chiapas is more than ever an economic struggle linked to their rights to cultivate their lands and sell their products at a fair price. However, a fair trade certified coffee is not a guarantee that their coffee will sell. Maya Vinic accelerated its process of certification thanks to the already existing network with fair trade importers and roasters from Europe

and the United States. Higher Grounds, Pistol and Burner, Arabejas, JEM, Just Coffee, Larry;s Beans and ChiapanECHO are the organizations that, aligned with the work of TransFair, Global Exchange and Equal Exchange promote consumer education through the selling of Maya Vinic fair trade and organic coffee.

### **Artisan Women Cooperatives: Maya and Kinal Antzetik**

Women are at the forefront of efforts to build economic opportunities for indigenous communities and civil society organizations (Eber and Kovic 2003). Weaving cooperative run and organized entirely by Mayan women are now a common reality in Chiapas. Traditional indigenous cultures do not consider women as entrepreneurs. Their role is primarily related to the maintenance of the household and the childcare. Yet, Chiapas women have been gaining much more respect and authority in their communities. In Acteal, a person like Maria Vazques symbolizes these changes. In spite of being a single mother, Maria is a highly respected survivor of the Acteal massacre and an active leader in civil society Las Abejas. The Maya Vinic cooperative, whose elected leadership is predominantly male, is pressured by the international community to promote their process of women emancipation and active participation in the decision making process. The progressive Catholic Church, with its liberating pastoral approaches, has highly contributed to this process of gender empowerment throughout Chiapas indigenous communities.

For the last ten years, indigenous women of the Highlands of Chiapas established several networks of collaboration with national and international NGOs, universities, churches and began creating their own organizations. Within organizations such as J'pas Joloveltik, the Organization of Artisan Women in the Highlands, the *Coordinadora*

*Diocesana de Mujeres'* (CODEMU), the Christian Base Communities (CEBs) of the Diocese and numerous cooperatives of weavers and bakers often supported by the Coordinating Committee for Peace (CONPAZ), women have worked on questions of reproductive health, human and indigenous rights, against sexual violence and for the promotion of women's dignity. Their voices were finally heard in their communities and together they achieved important solutions for the prevention and denunciation of domestic violence. As organized groups, women were able to demand the respect of their gender rights along with economic, political, and ethnic rights.

K'inal Antzetik, which means "Women's Earth" in Tzeltal, began in 1991 when a group of Indigenous women weavers came together to try to increase their income by pooling their skills and marketing strategies. K'inal Antzetik, like Maya Antzetic and other Chiapas based women artisan cooperatives, is developing its internal organizational strengths along with expanding their international recognition within the fair trade networks and international women's movement (Rovira 2000).

Since then, K'inal Antzetik has expanded from its initial focus on technical support for community cooperatives. K'inal Antzetik's work now includes trainings on sexual health and reproductive rights, education and literacy programs and leadership development for women. Their collective and cooperative artesanal work support their efforts to organize and defend their communities while gaining access to health care.

One of K'inal Antzetik's largest projects is a weaving cooperative in San Cristobal, Chiapas. Formed in 1996 in the face of rising military violence, sharply declining wages, rising costs of living and intensifying economic and political exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, the Jolom Mayaetik (Mayan weavers, in Tzeltal)

weaving cooperative focuses on economic and political autonomy for Indigenous women. Like other Chiapas based women cooperative K'in al provides its 350 members with economic and educational opportunities as part of creating local alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal economic model (Grimes and Milgram 2000).

K'in al Antzetik also runs several other cooperatives, including sewing, shoe-making and carpentry collectives. And, as part of a food-security initiative called *Seeds of Hope*, K'in al is helping women manage and operate a bakery. The aim of K'in al is to develop economic autonomy at the community level and improve women's ability to feed their families. This project aims to provide a reliable source of food, as well as income, for local families. The project includes distributing animals and vegetable seeds to families in the community and providing trainings on animal management, seed cultivation and organic gardening. The defense for human and indigeneous rights in Chiapas clearly passes through the rights of Indigenous women within their communities. K'in al, similar to other Chiapas women organizations, offers ongoing workshops on women's health and reproductive rights. Recently, K'in al completed a Report on Maternal Mortality in Indigenous communities, addressing issues of pregnancy and childbirth and compiled data and testimonies from women in Chiapas. K'in al also plays a critical role in the network of civil society organizations demanding equitable distribution of resources and respect for the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico.

### **Conclusion: Chiapas Lessons**

The political and social participation of Chiapas civil society organizations are closely tied cultures, organizations and networks capacity. This brief overview of

Chiapas CSOs illustrates how indigenous collective identities are the core of political and economic organizational capacity. Collective identities along with collective actions of resistance are also the essential factors for building effective solidarity networks across the globe. The civil society Las Abejas, the coffee cooperative Maya Vinic and the women cooperative Kinal Antzetik are three examples of how Chiapas civil society organizations perform effectively when an alignment of four factors occurs: cultural identities, organizational capacity, sustainable economies and glocal networks.

First, cultures are essentials in Chiapas and need to be recognized as such. Chiapas civil society organizations center their collective identities and actions into their own collective cultures. The more they are identified with their own cultural identity and indigenous rights the more they can sustain local and international coalitions.

Second, Chiapas civil society organizations need to continue their close relations with more structurally organized Mexican and international NGOs. They need to build their organizational capacities, managerial responsibilities and political awareness through the accompaniment of NGOs.

Third, Chiapas civil society organizations need to focus their energies into the formulation of effective strategies for economic sustainability. Their search for autonomy needs to be strengthened by their resistance to global/regional and local exploitations and by the promotion of alternative economic opportunities. Fair trade, organic productions and culturally driven initiatives appears to be an appropriate avenue toward sustainability.

Fourth, Chiapas civil society organizations must maintain and strengthen their inter-organizational and international relations. Their ability to dialogue with various governmental, for-profit and non-governmental sectors both at the local and global level

(glocal) is crucial for achieving peaceful and democratic social change with justice and dignity. They need to maintain their voice heard in the international community by intensifying exchange opportunities to and from Chiapas.

The organizational, social and cultural identities of these Chiapas CSOs encourage them to seek cross-cultural recognition, international solidarity and global action. Their collective identities clearly play an important role in re-shaping their collective actions of resistance and their active role in building sustainable alternatives of development through the formation and maintenance of international networks of solidarity. Las Abejas, Maya Vinic and Kinal Antzetik are three case studies that best describe the innovative ways that Chiapas CSOs have for transforming indigenous identities into international actions seeking democracy and peace with justice and dignity.

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