



The Future Role of the Ejido in Rural Mexico

Richard Snyder and Gabriel Torres, editors

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Campesinos, the State, and Agrarian Organization in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Yanga Villagómez, Hugo Santos Gómez, and Gloria Zafra

The Mexican government established the ejido and its administrative bodies as instruments for facilitating and regulating campesinos' access to land and for promoting rural development.¹ Yet external factors sometimes hindered or prohibited the ejido and its various assemblies, councils, and committees from fulfilling these functions. In these cases, the ejido as an institution for organizing production and promoting development was often displaced by other forms of peasant participation.

This chapter examines Irrigation District 19 (DR 19), in the coastal plain of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca State. This district encompasses the municipalities of Asunción Ixtaltepec, El Espinal, Juchitán, San Blas Atempa, San Pedro Comitancillo, San Pedro Huilotepec, Jalapa del Marqués, Santa María Mixtequilla, Santa María Xadani, Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, and Unión Hidalgo. Juchitán is the largest, with more than half of the district's irrigated land and 30 percent of the growers who make use of the irrigation system.

Within DR 19, the current organization of the ejidal governing bodies and their relatively weak ability to represent and defend the

¹ Under Mexican agrarian law, the top ejidal authority is the *asamblea de ejidatarios* (assembly of ejidatarios), even though the administrative functions of this body are delegated to two committees elected by the assembly: the *comisariado ejidal* (ejido executive council), and the *consejo de vigilancia* (oversight committee), which supervises the performance of the comisariado. The comisariado represents the ejidatarios in their official dealings with the government and other institutions.

ejidatarios' interests are the product of three key factors: the evolution of landholding patterns since the construction of the Benito Juárez reservoir and the irrigation district; government intervention in regional development planning via agricultural programs and projects; and the campesinos' use of electoral processes to press their demands for resources to support rural development.

DR 19 and the Regional Agrarian Context

In the late 1950s, as part of Mexico's drive to develop rural areas through extensive irrigation projects, work began on the Benito Juárez reservoir and the irrigation network it would feed (SRH 1964). This required regularizing land ownership throughout all of the area that would fall within the irrigation district, not a simple task since Mexico's agrarian law left the ownership issue unclear in many cases. To resolve this problem the federal government decided to expropriate the nearly 47,000 hectares that the irrigation project theoretically would benefit, and the land was officially claimed in a 1962 presidential decree. Two years later, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–70) issued a second decree creating an ejido that would encompass approximately 68,000 hectares (including almost 30,000 hectares within the irrigated area and another 38,000 hectares suitable for rainfed agriculture) and hold a population of 8,000 new ejidatarios (*Diario Oficial*, July 13, 1964).

The government's attempt at agrarian justice through the redistribution of land to landless peasants conflicted with the region's long-established pattern of a markedly unequal distribution of land. Not surprisingly, local landholders, both large and small, opposed the formation of the ejido, especially because in the implementation of the 1964 decree the government failed to take steps mandated in agrarian law to guarantee the rights of private owners of property slated to become ejido land (Binford 1985).² Local elites mobilized and managed to have the 1964 decree revoked.

Obligated to develop an alternative plan for redistributing these lands, the Agrarian Advisory Council³ determined in 1966 that 43,000 of the 68,000 hectares that were to be appropriated originally would remain ejido land (5,000 irrigated and 38,000 rainfed hectares), while the bulk of the land under irrigation (about 25,000 hectares) would be parceled out among 3,800 private individuals. Recipients of the 25,000

² Archivo de la Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria, Oaxaca. *Expediente de dotación*, Juchitán de Zaragoza.

³ Under the agrarian law in force until the 1992 reforms, the Agrarian Advisory Council (Cuerpo Consultivo Agrario) was responsible for resolving inequities resulting from presidential decrees affecting the rural sector.

hectares of irrigated land did not receive clear titles. Instead, the land was denoted "communal property not subject to encumbrance" (a form of landholding that did not exist in the agrarian code in force at the time), although its new owners effectively controlled it as private property, free of any ejidal oversight.

Unfortunately, the revised plan did not put an end to legal disputes. Within a few years, many poor campesinos who would have benefited under the 1964 decree began their fight to have it reinstated. By the early 1970s, these campesinos had united within the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI) to demand that the ejido mandated in the 1964 decree be created.

Exactly what types of ownership apply to what portions of the region's land remains obscure. Even government agencies report conflicting data on landholding patterns. Data from the administrative offices of Irrigation District 19 indicate that 17,560 hectares of the land within DR 19 (40.7 percent) are held as private property; 17,223 hectares (39.2 percent) are held communally;⁴ and 9,360 hectares (20.1 percent) belong to the ejido.⁵ This unequal distribution is exacerbated by a marked difference in the size of individual landholdings. Seventy-two percent of landholders have plots of 5 hectares or less; these same individuals have access to only 34 percent of the irrigated land. The 3.8 percent of farmers with plots of 20 hectares or more have access to 22 percent of that land (table 5.1). Of course, holding land within the irrigation district does not automatically confer access to irrigation. Rainfed agriculture still predominates in much of the acreage within DR 19. Growers cultivating these fields receive irrigation water only during droughts.⁶

The history of agrarian transformation in the region has produced a highly polarized agrarian structure. The decrees of the 1960s appear to be more the product of presidential campaign politics and fluctuating alliances among local groups than of a coherent land regularization strategy designed to promote regional agrarian planning (Binford 1985; Warman 1983). Efforts to distribute land and regularize patterns of ownership threatened the long-established agrarian structure and generated an intense struggle for control over the economic, political,

⁴ Communal property in rural Mexico is usually land held by indigenous communities whose claims date back to the pre-Columbian and colonial eras.

⁵ Because the administrative offices of DR 19 have the closest working relationship with the region's producers, their data tend to be more reliable than those available from other agencies.

⁶ The administrators of the district note that, of the nearly 50,000 hectares theoretically available for irrigation, only 25,000 actually receive irrigation water; the remainder are cultivated seasonally or left fallow. Some reports indicate that the maximum area irrigated by the reservoir and the system of canals was 21,000 hectares, in the 1968-1969 agricultural year (Piñón Jiménez 1994).

and social life of the region. This struggle among the region's different types of producers has turned the municipality and the ejido into arenas of political conflict.

TABLE 5.1
IRRIGATED AND RAINFED LAND BY PLOT SIZE IN DR 19

Plot size (hectares)	No. of Producers (%)	Irrigated Hectares (%)	Rainfed Hectares (%)	Total (%)
0-5	7,049 (71.84)	15,234.80 (34.30)	1,954.20 (26.70)	17,189.00 (33.22)
5-20	2,393 (24.39)	19,198.20 (43.22)	2,108.70 (28.82)	21,306.30 (41.18)
20+	370 (3.77)	9,987.60 (22.48)	3,255.10 (44.48)	13,241.90 (25.59)
Total	9,812 (100)	44,420.60 (100)	7,318.00 (100)	51,737.20 (100)

The situation among the region's producers is complicated further by lingering disputes between communities over contested land. For example, Tehuantepec and Álvaro Obregón are contending for control of 3,289 hectares claimed as smallholdings of communal origin. In San Blas Atempa, communal owners and smallholders of formerly communal property are battling over 6,000 hectares. Other conflicts, all boundary disputes, are being waged between San Pedro Huilotepec and San Mateo del Mar; by Tlacotepec against Ixtaltepec and Comitancillo; and by Juchitán against Asunción Ixtaltepec, San Dionisio del Mar, and Niltepec.

The controversies surrounding property rights in Irrigation District 19 are an important element for understanding what the past thirty years of agrarian development policies have achieved and what sectors they have benefited.

Development Projects and Their Social Impacts

The creation of Irrigation District 19 excluded an important fraction of campesinos from participating in the federal development strategy that was being implemented by agencies with a thirty-year history in the region. Moreover, the scheme of types of ownership stratified the campesinos, favoring with property titles landowners who were al-

ready the beneficiaries of regional agricultural development programs.

The group that had benefited most from past government development projects primarily comprises producers of commercial crops. It is this group that received most of the irrigated land within Irrigation District 19. Subsistence farmers, as well as those able to meet their subsistence needs and generate a very small surplus for the market, were largely excluded from past development projects, and they form the bulk of those holding ejidal plots within DR 19. They rely almost entirely on family labor (except during the harvest) and have limited access to government supports.

Another factor that underlies the dissimilar social impacts of the region's agrarian development projects regards the irrigation network itself. Much of the water sent through the main canal and the secondary channels is lost because of system inefficiencies. And because fields have not been leveled properly (some slope 12 percent), growers do not obtain the full benefit of the water that does reach them. A general apathy among the district's water users has prevented them from establishing some kind of organizational structure that could allocate labor and other resources for maintaining the system and improving its efficiency. Moreover, the costs of maintaining the network's sluices, canals, and sprinkler systems—and maintaining the machinery with which to make repairs—far exceed the capacity of most of the region's producers. Together, these factors have turned many subsistence producers away from the irrigation system and to total reliance on rainfed agriculture.

Another problem relates to the formula according to which water is distributed. An annual irrigation plan specifies how water is to be allocated to users.⁷ But in dry years, water distribution becomes notably arbitrary. It fails to take into account the individual water needs of the growers; rather, it appears to reflect the power relations between users and system administrators. For example, sluiceways are sometimes closed off (an event generally attributed to a system failure or technical problem) in order to divert water to one group of users to the detriment of another. Although such abuses of this collective resource have provoked intense conflict between producers and technical personnel, access to water continues to be determined largely by power relationships and links that individual producers are able to forge with administrators of the irrigation network.

Producers closely allied with the system administrators support the prevailing water management scheme and its established pattern of water allocation. Other producers gain access to water quotas by

⁷ Proximity to a canal is itself another source of differentiation among the campesinos. Those whose fields are closer, and hence more likely to get sufficient irrigation water, are more easily able to move into market crops.

participating in local associations linked to umbrella organizations, such as the National Peasants' Confederation (CNC), the National Confederation of Rural Smallholders (CNPR), or the COCEI. Other users receive only marginal benefit from the irrigation infrastructure and are regularly excluded from initiatives taken by DR 19's managers. This latter group has the lowest productivity level and the lowest living standard in the district. These "sub-subsistence" campesinos often do not even know how the irrigation district operates.

Several government development projects have influenced the organization of producers in the region. The project to develop a sugarcane zone is a good example. Because cane requires large amounts of water, the DR 19 reservoir and irrigation network appeared to favor the introduction of this lucrative crop. The José López Portillo sugar mill was established in early 1980, and its managers were anxious to see as much acreage as possible converted to cane. Campesinos chose to exploit the situation by charging exorbitant rents for the use of their land, in the process blocking any chance to develop a culture of sustained sugar production to supply the local market (Vargas et al. 1992; Moreno Derbez 1985). Technical problems and the inability to show a profit led to the mill's closure in the early 1990s and the cessation of cane cultivation in Irrigation District 19. During the mill's years in operation, its managers generally contracted with campesinos who were members of the CNC or the CNPR (formerly the National Confederation of Smallholders, CNPP), primarily because such affiliations typically gave these growers access to agricultural machinery, trucks, and so on. These two organizations—by processing loan applications and coordinating field preparation, cultivation, harvest, and transportation of the harvest to the mill for any member grower who agreed to convert his land to cane—effectively gained control of the cane production process.

Another institution that backed rural development projects for small producers was the Southern Agricultural Bank (Banco Agropecuario del Sur). One such project was to involve more small farmers in livestock raising (mostly of sheep and pigs), for which the bank granted loans for building fences, feedlots, and water tanks. When the actual cost of the loans mounted thanks to nearly usurious interest rates and cost inflation by inspectors and other bureaucrats, the farmers found themselves unable to service the loans and were forced to request an extension of the original ten-year repayment period.

For short-term production financing, the bank would loan the required funds to the campesino but simultaneously find a potential buyer for the campesino's product (usually cattle) and then negotiate with this buyer the terms of repayment. Generally the money from the sale of the livestock went directly to the bank to repay the loan, never passing through the producer's hands. This is one explanation

for the conflictual relations that have emerged between government development banks and the region's producers.

In the mid-1980s producers in DR 19 were grouped in a number of growers' organizations aimed at promoting the development projects outlined above and organizing production. These included eleven organizations for marketing, distributing fertilizer, and supporting indigenous crafts production; three rural production societies (SPRs); five livestock associations; and one livestock union. Today most farmers are apathetic about forming associations to organize production, increase market access, or obtain credit.⁸ Instead, they tend to purchase their inputs, grow their crops or raise their livestock, and sell their production individually, even though formally they may be members of rural associations.

At this point it is important to provide an overview of public investment in the region. In turning to this topic, we examine aggregate data on federal and state budgets as well as on specific direct investments. In 1993 total government funds allocated to the forty-one municipalities within the Juchitán and Tehuantepec administrative districts was Mex\$160,374,149.⁹ More than a third of this amount (\$57,964,938) went to ten of the eleven municipalities in DR 19. Corresponding figures for 1994 were a total of \$122,161,340, and \$50,515,446 (just over 40 percent) to the irrigation district municipalities.

The bulk of public investment goes to the municipalities and to support federal public works projects—sewerage, potable water, electricity, housing, and roads—as well as rural development activities. Projects completed thus far include electrification, street paving, school construction, highways and farm roads, the establishment of Municipal Solidarity Funds and Solidarity Production Funds, welfare and community services, and sports facilities; these activities accounted for about 74 percent of government funds for the municipalities within the Juchitán administrative district and 61 percent for those of Tehuantepec in 1994. Clearly the agricultural sector is just one among the many sectors that must share the public monies channeled to the region through various government agencies. Most outlays are directed to providing public services and are not directly or necessarily linked to agriculture. Between 1986 and 1992 there was significant additional public investment in agriculture, primarily to support the construction in Mixtequilla and Comitancillo of two pumping stations that brought almost 2,100 more hectares under irrigation (CNA 1994).

⁸ Today's organizations tend to be more political than production oriented; the most important regionally is the COCEI, which organizes mainly corn producers. The growers who abandoned sugarcane switched to sorghum and other commercial crops or to cattle raising. Most are affiliated with either the CNC or the CNPR.

⁹ These data are from the Comité de Planeación del Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca.

Little progress has been made to date in organizing producers in DR 19 and transferring to them management of some water distribution services. The primary obstacle is financial; the water users themselves are unable to support the costs of maintaining the irrigation infrastructure, and their businesses and producer associations have been drained of capital.

Production within the district tends to vary according to access to water. Corn predominates in the irrigated area along the Tehuantepec River. The corn is used to make *totopo*, a dietary staple in the Isthmus and an important element in Zapotec culture. Totopo production is supported by social solidarity associations and by the National Fund for Solidarity Businesses (FONAES), an agency of the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL). For example, the municipality of Santa María Xadani receives 6 percent of all FONAES investment in the Isthmus to support its production and marketing of totopo. Juchitán also receives substantial funding to support totopo, but also for producing furniture (constructed with local hardwoods) and shoes, and for cattle raising. In Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, these investments promote poultry and pig farming. Producers' associations have been established in Juchitán to promote agriculture, textile production (embroidered women's clothing), and other activities such as carpentry, leather working, and hammock making.

This overview of the breadth of public investments and supports to economic activity and infrastructure speaks to the importance of government agencies in the region. Government intervention continues to be the key to sustained investment in various areas of agricultural production. Nevertheless, the fact that a large share of government funds goes to support public services may indicate that such investments are gaining favor over those targeted to agriculture. While any development policy must perforce address both of these areas, one essential component will be mechanisms that encourage the formation of producer associations able to provide continuity in agricultural programs, financing, technical assistance, and training.

The region has a long history of widespread popular participation in securing resources for improving public services, and the campesino sector has been an important part of this effort. It is appropriate, therefore, that future choices about allocating these resources should include supporting activities to organize production and to increase the efficiency of the region's irrigation infrastructure.

Politics and Rural Struggles: The Case of COCEI

New forms of organization have emerged in the Isthmus that link rural producers to broad social movements demanding government

support for new development projects and the inclusion of producers who were shut out by past investment strategies. Foremost among these is the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus, which since its formation in the 1970s has virtually supplanted formal ejidal institutions in the Isthmus.¹⁰ COCEI's first demand was for a more equitable distribution of land within the irrigation district, and it has continued to lodge demands on behalf of the region's most marginalized producers. COCEI has become a rallying force principally because of its success in these endeavors.

Producers not affiliated with COCEI, typically those who benefit most under prevailing agricultural development policies, are associated instead with the corporatist organizations of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Thus, in the context of uncertainty over ownership of much of the land within DR 19, private individuals advancing claims of ownership tend to be clustered in the CNPR and the ejidatarios contesting for the land belong to the CNC.

Agrarian and municipal issues are inextricably interwoven in the municipalities encompassed by Irrigation District 19. In Juchitán, control of municipal government equates loosely with control of the rural sector because of local government's key involvement in determining which land claims will be recognized. Controlling the municipal government carries with it the ability to block the claims of one contingent of would-be owners in favor of another.

In the second half of the 1970s, COCEI mobilized to demand resources for agriculture and reduced prices for transportation, health care, education, and so forth, to make these affordable to the region's poorest inhabitants. It ran candidates for Juchitán's municipal government, lost to the PRI through electoral fraud, organized massive demonstrations to protest the stealing of the election, and ultimately forced the authorities to recognize its victory. The COCEI-controlled government in Juchitán was able to respond to a number of rural demands. The most important is that it regularized land titles within the irrigation district; it also appointed ejidal representative bodies and made available agricultural supports such as credit and crop insurance. After three years, the Oaxacan state legislature removed the COCEI from the municipal government, alleging irregularities in its handling of state funding to the municipality—an action that sparked massive, often violent mobilizations.

Over the next few years, protesters occupied government buildings, staged hunger strikes, took part in confrontations, were jailed as militants, and rejected municipal authority outright. Eventually activists with common goals were able to coordinate their strategies and

¹⁰ In 1978 the COCEI won a number of elected positions within the ejido of Juchitán, but the Ministry of Agrarian Reform nullified the election results.

maintain a steady level of social mobilization and political energy. Thus, during the next municipal elections, the political context was one of extensive, but nonviolent, popular participation. In 1983, reforms to the Mexican Constitution permitted establishing shared municipal governments, with seats allocated proportionately according to each group or party's vote share;¹¹ Juchitán's municipal council elected in 1986 included representatives from both the COCEI and the PRI.

The campesinos' participation in the struggle to retake the municipality for the COCEI stemmed from the fact that the municipal government was recognized as the point of origin for many of the irregularities in the distribution of land rights.

Conclusion

The ejido, the jewel of Mexico's agrarian reform, entailed not only a redistribution of land to campesinos but also the creation of some kind of local organization able to represent the campesinos' interests. The ejido executive councils were established for this purpose: to serve as intermediaries between campesinos and government agencies charged with rural development.

In the case of Irrigation District 19, constructing the reservoir, digging the irrigation canals, and leveling the fields depended on a prior "reordering" of land ownership that would guarantee the optimal operation of the irrigation system once completed. Nevertheless, this reordering produced severe dislocations in the structure of landholding: a markedly unequal distribution of land among producers, to the point that an important fraction was excluded from the benefits of the irrigation district. Conflicts over the way in which land was allocated left a significant share of producers without any legal representation (that is, without *comisariados ejidales*). Later, when a series of government projects were launched in the region, these same inequities in landholdings were echoed, necessarily, in an uneven distribution of the benefits of rural development programs.

This situation opened a political space; and a social movement led by the COCEI, an organization with strong roots in the region, moved to fill it. In the absence of functioning ejidal representative bodies, COCEI acted as a new intermediary between producers and government rural development agencies. The COCEI's struggle to win municipal government positions, especially in Juchitán, went part way

¹¹ These reforms were to Article 115 of the Constitution, which dictates the form and structure of municipalities as well as the relationship between municipalities and other levels of government (*Diario Oficial*, February 3, 1983).

toward its goal of gaining a stronger position from which to fulfill its role as interlocutor with government development agencies.

For their part, the various government agencies operating in the region have been constrained by social and political pressures from those segments of society that have organized around COCEI. Consequently, the organization of production and securing of financial support for the rural sector in the Isthmus have been achieved by means of strategies that do not rely primarily on ejidal institutions.

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