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# Organizing the Peasants: Participation, Organization and the Politics of Development in a Mexican Government Program<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article discusses some problems with participatory approaches in development thinking. It is argued that external interventions are always embedded within wider fields of power (force fields) and that discourses of “participation” and “grassroots initiatives” cannot change these established power relations. A study is presented of a Mexican government program that used a “bottom-up participatory approach” in order to stimulate *ejidos* to formulate their own internal *ejido* rules. It is shown that this program—in which “local organizing capacities” were said to be central elements—did not change the existing force field and only created more room for officials and intermediaries in their negotiations with peasants.

**Keywords:** Mexico, participation, organization, development, *ejido*, agrarian law

**Résumé :** Cet article traite des problèmes rencontrés par l'approche participative dans la planification du développement. L'auteure soutient que les interventions exogènes sont toujours encadrées dans des champs de pouvoir plus englobants (des champs de force) et que les discours de «participation» et d'«initiatives populaires» ne peuvent changer les relations de pouvoir en place. On présente l'étude d'un programme du gouvernement mexicain qui a utilisé «l'approche participative de bas en haut» dans le but de stimuler les *ejidos* à formuler leurs propres règles. On démontre que ce programme – dans lequel les «capacités organisationnelles locales» étaient censées être les éléments principaux – n'ont pas changé le champ de force existant et n'ont fait que créer plus d'espace pour les agents officiels et intermédiaires dans leurs négociations avec les paysans.

**Mots-clés :** Mexique, participation, organisation, développement, *ejido*, lois agraires

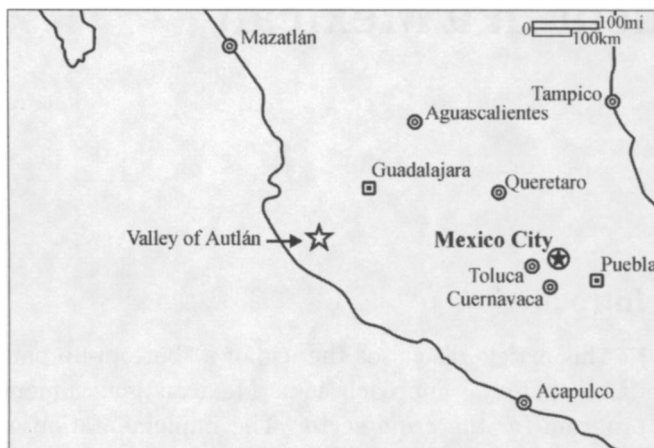
## Introduction

This article discusses the use of a “bottom-up participatory” approach in a Mexican government program for the *ejido* sector. The implementation of this program—in which *ejidos* were stimulated to formulate their own internal *ejido* rules—shows what may happen when “local organizing capacities” are made central to government programs “imposed from above.” Much development literature gives a central role to local organization for improving the situation of the poor. In these works, participatory approaches and grassroots initiatives have become very popular. However, these approaches tend to ignore the ways in which forms of organizing and external interventions are always embedded within wider fields of power. This explains why many so-called “participatory bottom-up” projects often turn into top-down impositions bearing little relation to the organizing priorities of the “target groups.”

The implementation of the Mexican government program of the Internal Ejido Rules (EIR) is followed in detail in the period between 1993 and 1994 in the region of Autlán, Western Mexico. This program aimed to improve the organization of the *ejido* at the local level by introducing legalistic and formalistic organization models. It is shown how the implementation of the program was influenced by the strained relationship between *ejidatarios* and the Mexican state and how it was appropriated in different and unexpected ways by various people.

In this article, first a short overview is presented of the role of organization and participation in the development debate. Then, an analysis is presented of local organization in the Mexican *ejido* based on a case study of the *ejido* La Canoa in the valley of Autlán. It is demonstrated that much so-called informal organizing at the local level has, over time, turned into firmly established practices with their own logic. In this context, an

analysis is made of the Internal Ejido Rules program. Finally, some remarks are made about the possible role of the anthropologist in the debate about local organization and development.



Map 1: The valley of Autlán in Mexico

## Organization and Participation in the Development Literature

In the development debate, organizations and institutions are attributed central roles in the empowerment of the poor, the increase of economic productivity and the effective and equitable management of resources (Berkes, 1995; Curtis, 1991; Esman and Uphoff, 1984; FAO/UNDP, 1998; Ghai D. and Vivian J., 1992).<sup>2</sup> It is argued that development workers should help the poor to develop better forms of organization. This emphasis on organization is accompanied by a stress on education, participation and consciousness raising (Pretty and Chambers, 1993; Pretty et al., 1995; World Bank, 1996). Yet, despite substantial academic advances in this field, naïve ideas about community development and idealistic notions about the degree of co-operation possible in community ventures still prevail in much of the discussion (Shepherd, 1998: 13).

Several conceptual problems seriously hamper the debate on organization- and institution-building for development. First, in most concepts of organizations and institutions alike, reference is made to collective actions and goals. For example, Uphoff argues that institutions are complexes of norms and behaviours that persist over time by serving collectively valued purposes (1986: 9). Yet, this view seems more an ideology than a reality. Although it is true that in formal terms most organizations are defined in terms of collective goals, in reality the different members of an organization may all have different goals and interests. Obviously, these may change over time. Furthermore, organizations and institutions are often used as

instruments of domination that further the interests of elites at the expense of others (Morgan, 1986: 275).

The second serious flaw in the existing discussion is the focus on formalized organizations. This implies that little attention is paid to the fact that people often prefer to work in loose personal networks instead of collective projects, or that villagers may work in continuously changing constellations instead of in more enduring groups. In many situations this can be explained by the fact that the leaders or representatives of organizations tend to establish personal relations with the state bureaucracy and in this way local elites may easily regroup and become re-empowered (Singh, 1988: 44). So, although many development theories stress the importance of “building self-reliant village organizations,” there are many situations in which it can be important for the poor to remain outside more formalized forms of organizing, whether these are governmental, non-governmental, local or community based.

A third weakness in the debate on organization for development concerns the unrealistic views on the relation between organizing and power. The multidimensional differentiations among the poor or rural people themselves based on economic differences, gender, age and ethnic identities is often ignored (see critique by Brohman, 1996; Leach et al., 1997: 11). This naïve view with respect to power relations within local communities is also reflected in the role that is attributed to the law and regulations. In fact, the idea that new forms of organizing can make a dramatic difference to the lives of the poor is based on the notion of social and legal engineering—the belief that by changing rules one can change society. But, as Stiefel and Wolfe point out “processes of legal and institutional reform by themselves probably have little chance to sustain a democratic process and prevent new authoritarian structures from emerging” (1994: 200). Although rules and formal structures may influence established practices, they can never control or transform them in pre-established ways.

A very popular and widely used method in development work that well illustrates some central problems with “participatory” and “bottom-up” approaches is the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). The PRA fits well the concern of development agencies for quick methodologies, which can assess situations in relation to planned intervention in a short period of time.<sup>3</sup> PRAs and related methodologies are community oriented and focus very much on group processes. Within this perspective there is an impressive body of literature on adult education and experimental learning processes in

development.<sup>4</sup> PRA approaches also stress the importance of being participatory.

Although PRA approaches stress their participatory character, Mosse (1994, 1997) presents a good analysis of the limitations of—what I would call—the “imposition of participation from above.” Mosse argues that although the effectiveness of PRA methods are considered to be based on a relationship of trust, agreement and cooperation generated in informal contexts, the reality of PRAs is that they often construct highly formal contexts influenced by power relations. PRAs concern group activities, which involve important and influential outsiders (even foreigners), that take place in public places (schools, temples) and where information is discussed publicly. Such activities are far from informal, everyday life. In addition, the equipment of PRA research—paper, charts, coloured powders, etc.—may generate a great sense of mystification. According to Mosse, in the way PRAs are organized they become public, social events in which knowledge is constructed for the purpose of development projects. In addition, the fact that PRA meetings often work towards consensus and the taking of collective decisions, means that the PRA can even become a mechanism through which people in authority can turn their private interests into official community interests by projecting their own private interests as public community interests (Mosse, 1994: 497-505). Although this critique concerns PRAs, it points to more general problems with “participatory” and “bottom-up” approaches. By focussing on collective projects these approaches ignore the importance of existing power relations and the non-collective ways in which many rural families organize their daily lives. By this emphasis on the group and on techniques to guide group processes, participatory approaches tend to de-politicize the “development setting” and to replace the analysis of power relations and political processes with methodological preoccupations.

By way of conclusion, we should be careful with the uncritical use of notions like “community based organizations” and “bottom-up and participatory approaches.” These are not unproblematic. There are no easy “organizational” answers to complex sociopolitical problems or to the complicated dilemmas related to the management of natural resources. A more sophisticated approach of organizing processes in relation to wider power constellations is necessary. Within this perspective development intervention itself should also be object of study.

## Organizing Practices within Different Force Fields

Surprisingly, greatly improved academic understanding on organization and organizing processes is not

reflected in the development debate. In fact, most writing on “organization for development” uses a social systems perspective on organizations in which organizations are seen as “social units directed to the achievement of collective goals or the fulfillment of institutional needs for the wider society or environment of which they are a constituent part” (Reed, 1992: 75, 76). However, some anthropologists working on development issues have developed ideas on organizing processes that take a distance from the systems perspective and that pay more attention to the reality of rural livelihoods. They have argued that there are many ways in which rural people organize activities in their daily life. In most of these instances, no organizations are set up but networks are mobilized which provide crucial information, financial support and practical help (see Long, 1988). The ways in which rural people manage to circumvent the law or resist forms of oppression is a clear indication that there is no lack of organizing skills and inventiveness. Following the same line of thought, Wolf argues that we should get away from viewing organization as a product or outcome, and move to an understanding of organization as a process. He suggests that we could make a start by following the “flow of action,” to ask what is going on, why it is going on, who engages in it, with whom, when and how often. At the same time we should study the forces that drive these organizing processes (Wolf, 1990: 591).

Taking this idea a step further, I argue that in the actions and strategies that individual people follow to try to achieve certain things, we often discern forms of structuring or patterning. Hence, patterns can also be distinguished in the apparently “disordered,” the “informal” and the “corrupt.” This is well illustrated, by so-called “corrupt” activities, in which for the people involved the “rules of the game” with respect to the arguments they will have to use in the negotiations and how much they will have to pay for certain services, are quite clear. In my view, this patterning of organizing practices in unexpected and often “invisible” ways always occurs around the management of natural resources. Based on the foregoing, I define a *force field* as a field of power and struggle between different social actors around certain resources or problems and around which certain forms of dominance, contention and resistance may develop, as well as certain regularities and forms of ordering (see Nuijten, 1998). In this view, the patterning of organizing processes is not the result of a common understanding or normative agreement, but of the forces at play within the field. Most of the time, this patterning of



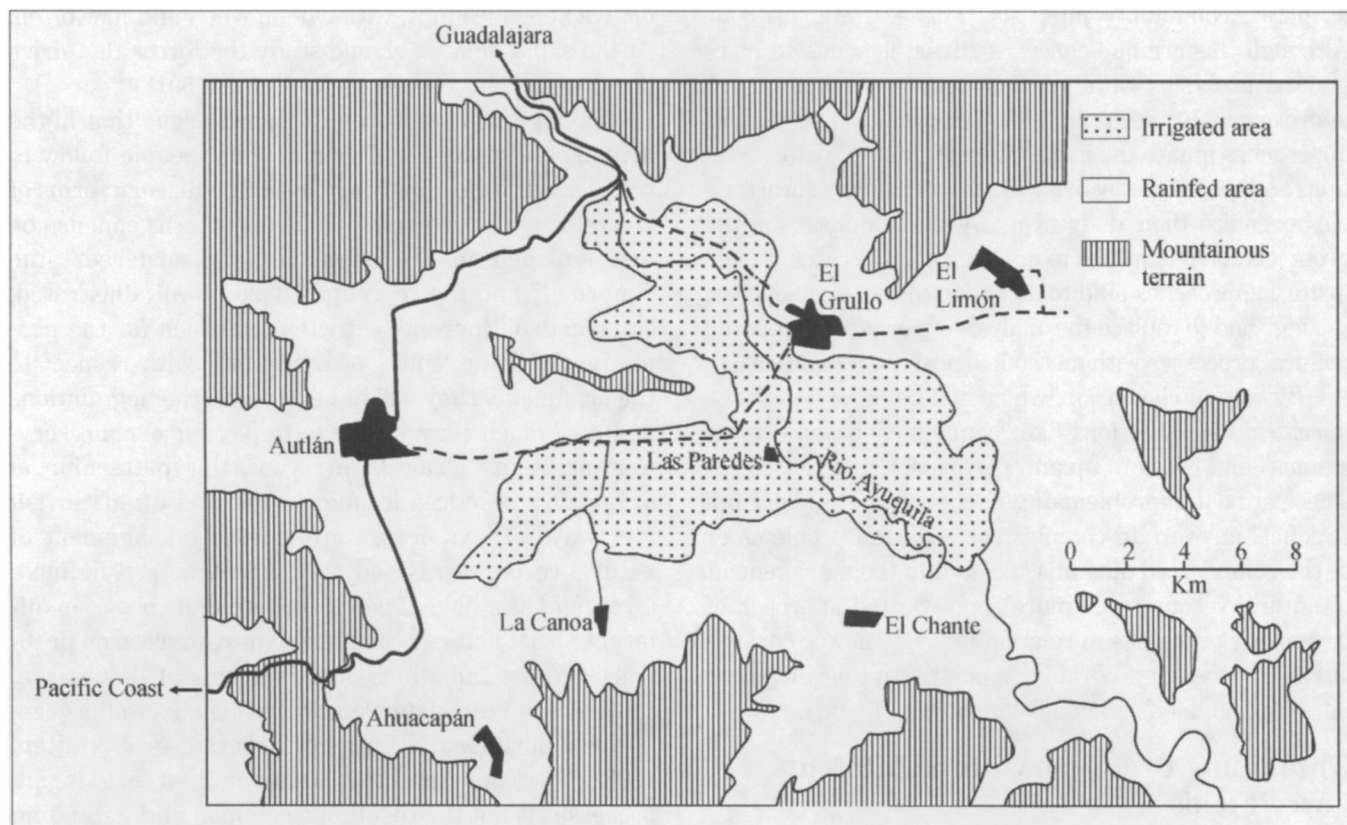
organizing practices is of a decentred nature, which means that there is no single centre of control and that there is no single organizational body which controls the organizing process. This notion of force field resembles Bourdieu's notion of a field (1992: 94-115). According to Bourdieu, the field is the locus of relations of force and not only of meaning. The coherence that may be observed in a given state of the field is born of conflict and competition and not of some kind of immanent self-development of the structure. Every field has its own logic, rules and regularities which are not explicit and which make it resemble the playing of games. These struggles and activities in the field always produce differences.

Yet, in contrast to Bourdieu, my notion of force field leaves more room for indeterminateness, fragmentation and, most importantly, human consciousness. Continuous critical reflections by human agents, their theorizing on politics and power in society and their storytelling are considered to be central elements of the organizing practices that develop in certain force fields. In other words, organizing practices, however structured they may be, are the subject of constant critical reflection. These reflections also

express forms of struggle, contention and resistance in relation to existing relations of power (cf. Tsing, 1993). In this way, an organizing practice approach favours a focus on struggles, areas of conflicts and differences in interests. This is in contrast to most studies of organizations that tend to focus on collective goals and interests and see the existence of conflicts and differences (for example, the famous "free-riders problem") as problematic and deviations from the normal situation.

### Organization in the Mexican Ejido: La Canoa

Before discussing the implementation of a Mexican government program of peasant organization in which local initiatives and participation from the ground were central elements, the context in which this program was introduced will be explained. A short background of the history of the Mexican ejido will be presented, as well as a description of the local organizing practices in the ejido that the government program intended to improve. The ethnographic material is based on research conducted in the ejido La Canoa, in the valley of Autlán in Western Mexico.<sup>5</sup>



Map 2: La Canoa in the valley of Autlán.

The town of Autlán is 180 kilometres from the state capital Guadalajara and is an important regional centre and a gateway to the sparsely populated coastal zone of Jalisco. The Autlán valley is a predominantly agrarian region. A great change was brought to the area in the beginning of the 1960s when an irrigation system constructed by the Mexican government came into operation. Since then almost half of the arable land in the valley has been irrigated and production and economic activities have greatly increased. A sugarcane refinery was established near the town of El Grullo and sugarcane has become the dominant crop on the irrigated lands.

La Canoa is one of the many small hamlets in the valley. In 1938, La Canoa received lands to establish its own ejido. In total the ejido received approximately 450 hectares arable land and 1 800 hectares lands in the mountains. The arable land they received was immediately divided into individual plots, while the mountainous land became common lands used for the herding of cattle. Since the 1960s, half of the arable ejido land of La Canoa falls within the irrigation district. However, over the years, the number of households has increased substantially and today most households in the village have no access to land. La Canoa has 837 inhabitants<sup>6</sup> while the ejido La Canoa has 97 members (ejidatarios). Many villagers, ejidatarios as well as non-ejidatarios, combine their life in the village with migration to the United States.

The ejido form of land tenure was established at the beginning of this century when large landholdings were expropriated and the confiscated lands were handed over to the landless rural population. In most ejidos the arable land was immediately divided into individual plots. Although officially they only received usufructuary rights, the ejidatarios could till their own plot and were allowed to leave it to the inheritor of their choice. However, the use of an ejido plot was tied to many rules.<sup>7</sup> For example, the agrarian law prohibited the selling of ejido plots, renting them out or leaving them unused. Yet, despite the strict agrarian law, these became common practices in ejidos throughout Mexico (see Bartra et al., 1975; Gordillo, 1988; Warman, 1976). As in most ejidos, in La Canoa the possession of an ejido plot turned into a form of private property with considerable security in tenure for the people involved. Locally, people know very well which plot belongs to whom and, they follow strict local rules in land transactions (see Nuijten, 1997 for an analysis of this development).

At the local level, the executive committee is responsible for the daily administration of ejido affairs. The executive committee has to render accounts of their activities to the general ejido assembly, which is the high-

est authority at the local level. Ejido meetings should be held every month and decisions have to be taken by a majority of votes of the ejido assembly. However, with respect to the daily management of the ejido, things also worked out differently. It became a common phenomenon in ejidos that no decisions were arrived at at the monthly meetings but that the head of the ejido, the commissioner, took decisions on his own or in small groups, which were not accountable to the ejido assembly. Furthermore, in many ejidos the monthly meetings were not held or, if they were held, few ejidatarios attended (Reyes et al., 1974; Zaragoza and Macías, 1980). In La Canoa similar practices developed over time.

As the official rules concerning the use of the land and the administration of the ejido are seldom followed, and the ejidatarios themselves show little interest in formal procedures, the ejido system is often labelled by government officials as “disorganized.” Officials tend to complain that ejidatarios do not know the rules nor do they seem to be very interested in them. The lack of attendance at the meetings, the lack of public accountability, and the lack of transparency are described as “backwards.” So, it is common to hear officials argue that the ejidatarios of La Canoa should be better educated in their tasks as community members and must be made conscious of their tasks as a group with collective resources and interests. It is also claimed that ejidatarios lack certain skills and should be helped to organize themselves better. As we shall see, this was precisely the language that was used in the government program for the improvement of local ejido management and the formulation of new internal ejido rules.

Although from the modernist systems perspective used by government officials one can easily argue that the management of the ejido at the local level is “disorganized,” we find strong forms of ordering when we study the ejido from a perspective of organizing practices. As was explained above, the concept of organizing practices refers to regularities and forms of ordering that develop in organizing activities as a result of the forces at play within a wider field of power. These regularities are reflected in the manifold implicit “rules of the game” in everyday life. More often than not, these organizing practices are of an informal, decentred nature, which means that there is no single centre of control and that there is no single organizational body which controls the organizing process.

More in specifically, when we study the ejido La Canoa from an organizing practice approach, we find considerable ordering with respect to the ways in which access to land is organized and with respect to control

over local ejido leaders. Although these forms of ordering do not follow the official laws concerning access to land, we saw that over the years ejido land possession has become a form of private property with considerable legal security. This also means that although the ejido commissioner takes many decisions on his own he has very little room to operate in. His decisions may concern to whom he sells the pasture in the commons, or how many trips he makes to Mexico City, but he cannot decide to evict somebody from an individual ejido plot or to take land back from somebody in the commons. So, paradoxically, while the ejido commissioner has a high degree of autonomy in his decisions, his room for manoeuvre is limited. Little scope exists for abrupt changes of established routines by individual ejidatarios or commissioners.

Within the little room he has to manoeuvre, he has, the ejido commissioner organizes ejido matters in small, changing groups in private spheres. This explains why ejido meetings have little to do with public presentation of information, decision-making and rendering of accounts by the executive committee. Yet, in La Canoa very effective means of accountability exist outside the formal structures. People find out what is going on in the streets, the bar and in other places. Commissioners can be criticized by fellow ejidatarios and called to account for the spending of the ejido money in many other settings. So, although meetings are often not held and although the general assembly is not the decision-making body in the ejido, there are other ways in which the ejidatarios check on what is going on and keep control over the executive committee. Effective ways of controlling the commissioner and stopping him in the case of abuse of power include, for example, the use of regional political networks, gossip and the exclusion of his relatives from other village activities. The politics of honour also plays an important role in the room commissioners create for themselves and in the way they are judged by others. Summarizing, we do not find a "lack of organization" at the local level but a situation in which the management of resources depends on a constellation of elements set within a wider force field without a centre of decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

Ejidatarios themselves often reflect on the organizational characteristics of their ejido. This shows that they are in a critical, reflective dialogue with the world in which they live, with themselves and with development workers (see Pigg, 1996 for a similar argument). Officials always say to the ejidatarios that they should accept their responsibilities, follow the formal rules and organize themselves better. This places the ejidatarios

in a dialogue between their "practical knowledge" and a "modernist organization discourse." For example, many ejidatarios say that they know that it is their duty to attend the ejido meetings but at the same time they can explain to you why they often prefer not to go. They argue that important decisions are not taken at the meetings but at other places and that the meetings have become unpleasant events of bickering and accusations.

In conflictive situations we see that ejidatarios tend to stress the necessity of following the formal procedures. Then they also express their frustration with the lack of accountability and central control. However, most of the time the ejidatarios do not mind the lack of management and control. Nor do they mind the fact that in the view of outsiders their ejido is "disorganized." The fact that the ejido does not function according to the official model gives them a lot of freedom in their operations and means that nobody interferes with their illegal land transactions. Furthermore, they have considerable security of land tenure. So, most of the time there is no reason for the ejidatarios to want the ejido administration to work differently and in a so-called modern, democratic way.

### **A New Style of Government Intervention and the Program of the Internal Ejido Rules (IER)**

In 1992 article 27 of the Mexican Constitution and the Agrarian Law was changed. The most important elements of the new Agrarian Law in comparison with the old Federal Agrarian Reform Law are the following. Firstly, the Mexican agrarian reform has come to its end, no longer will land be expropriated in order to establish or enlarge ejidos. Secondly, the ejido form of land tenure will continue to exist, but in a "modern" form. In this new form, ejidatarios will be allowed to sell, buy, rent or lease their land, activities that were all forbidden under the old Agrarian Reform Law. Thirdly, the law opens the possibility for ejidatarios to work in association with private enterprises (stockholding companies) and individual investors.

In addition, a new government program was introduced, PROCEDE, aimed at measuring the ejido borders and all the individual ejido plots.<sup>9</sup> Once this process was completed, ejidatarios could decide to change from the ejido regime to private land ownership.<sup>10</sup> In the government propaganda accompanying the changes it was claimed that all these transformations would bring more legal security in land tenure for ejidatarios. Furthermore, ejidatarios would from now on be able to mortgage their land, obtain credit at commercial banks and become



“dynamic entrepreneurs.” All these improvements would finally lead to an increase in agricultural productivity. It is not surprising that this argument carried weight at a time when Mexico was negotiating the free trade agreement NAFTA with Canada and the United States.

Together with this radical change of the Mexican ejido system, a new style of government intervention was introduced. In government publications the widespread corruption in the Ministry of Agrarian Reform (SRA) was presented as the main source of agrarian problems in the country and the cause of the continuing exploitation of the ejidatarios. It was declared that drastic changes were required and a new agrarian institute, the Procuraduría Agraria (PA) (Attorney General’s Office for Agrarian Affairs) was established to bring justice to the Mexican countryside. The blaming of the SRA for the agrarian problems in Mexico was part of president Salinas’ broader political discourse of change, modernization and democratization. Admitting past government corruption and failures, the Mexican president declared that all this was about to change. In order to show his good intentions, president Salinas appointed Arturo Warman, an internationally well-known academician who had published widely on state-peasant relations and agrarian reform in Mexico, head of the new PA. The SRA would remain responsible for the resolution of the numerous agrarian arrears. The PA would begin its new mission with the implementation of the PROCEDE program.

The PA introduced a new style of government intervention in which officials should no longer treat peasants in the usual paternalistic way but instead as capable individuals with their own valuable views. Much emphasis was put on the importance of local forms of organization and of initiatives from the ejidatarios themselves. According to the official PA propaganda the ejidatarios had to become “independent” and “self-reliant,” after more than a half-century of state tutelage. This image of the “self-reliant peasant” formed part of the development of a new institutional identity of the PA that would distinguish it from the SRA. This new image became very clear in *Espacios*, the new magazine of the PA. Arturo Warman, expressed himself in this magazine in the following way:

Our goal is to resolve issues....It is also to treat the campesinos with respect. We must play a key role in creating a new agrarian culture that rejects paternalism and puts campesinos in charge of their own lives. (*Espacios* No. 1 [March-April 1993]: 3, own translation)

One of the programs that was introduced with the new agrarian law, was the program of the Internal Ejido Rules (*Reglamento Interno*). The possibility of formulating Internal Ejido Rules (IER) already existed under the old agrarian reform law, but was given new prominence. In the IER each ejido could specify rules concerning the internal administration of the ejido at the local level. So, the IER was presented as the perfect way for the ejidos to show their self-determination. It was propagated that consciousness raising and local organization were central to progress in the ejidos and that each ejido should formulate its IER according to its particular local situation and the aspirations of the ejidatarios.

Although such a project sounds sympathetic, it becomes much less appealing when we take into account that ejido organizing practices have developed in a way that bears little relation to the official rules. As we saw, in La Canoa the ejido assembly only plays a limited role in the management of ejido affairs and no centre of decision-making exists. Taking this into consideration, the project of formulating internal rules becomes much less appealing. One might ask, what could be the use of formulating more rules. I will now describe in detail how the implementation of the IER program evolved in La Canoa and the region of Autlán.

### Implementation of the IER Program in the Valley of Autlán

By the time the IER program started I had already been working for some time in La Canoa and the ejido commissioner and several other ejidatarios relied more and more on my information and advice. This has to be seen in the light of many bad experiences they have had with government programs and officials in the past. Ejidatarios are used to the fact that programs work out in a different way than officially is presented and that they often have to pay officials for their services. Especially the SRA has a bad reputation in that respect. So, several ejidatarios tried to put me in a sort of broker’s role. This role had two sides. First of all, they liked me doing the information seeking with officials at different institutions. Secondly, they hoped that my presence in meetings and negotiations with officials would withhold them from asking bribes from the ejidatarios. So, on several occasions I felt like a “buffer” between the ejidatarios and officials.

Although at the start of the IER program in the region of Autlán several institutions participated, it was decided at higher bureaucratic levels that the SRA should take over and gradually the other institutions withdrew from further activities. Many ejidos were dis-



appointed that they had to work with the SRA again. On the basis of past experiences, they were convinced that the SRA officials would ask the ejido for money in exchange for assistance with the IER.

In June 1993 a meeting was held in La Canoa about the IER. Manuel, the head of the SRA office in Autlán, came to the meeting. He never used to visit the ejidos but he was under great pressure from the Guadalajara office to finish IERs. Manuel explained that a small committee had to be formed in La Canoa which could elaborate the IER. He said that he would personally give assistance to this committee. He stressed the importance of the IER for obtaining loans in the future. After various questions, a discussion started about who should be in the IER committee. Two young men were proposed, sons of ejidatarios who had received secondary education. Then I was proposed as a member of the committee. Finally, it was decided to have some older experienced ejidatarios as well. So two older men also became part of the committee. The five of us signed the papers of the IER committee. The meeting came to its end and it was decided that the IER committee would meet with Manuel the next day at his office.

At the meeting with the head of the SRA at his office the next day, Manuel made it clear that he did not have much time to work with the ejidatarios. He said that he had written down ten points to start the work. He read out the points which were formulated in a very legalist terminology and which the people from La Canoa clearly did not understand. The ten points he had written down came directly from the agrarian law and had nothing to do with the situation in La Canoa.

Some days after the meeting it became clear that the two older ejidatarios on the committee did not see the point of the IER and that they would not come to the meetings anymore. The whole project of the IER seemed a ridiculous endeavor. Framing this document was too big a challenge for the ejidatarios. The rules had to be based on the new agrarian law, as the law restricts what themes can be addressed. Therefore, the ejidatarios first had to know the law in detail in order to know where variation was possible: they could then formulate their own Internal Ejido Rules. Since many ejidatarios can barely read, this task of studying the agrarian law was all but impossible. However, more importantly, the new agrarian law appeared to be open to various interpretations and again education did not seem to be the only issue here. This became clear when a university-educated Mexican friend who was working in another region helped an ejido to formulate its IER. This IER was then rejected by the RAN (National Agrarian Reg-

istry) for including local rules, which went against the agrarian law. In this way, it seemed that the new laws were used to stifle local creativity and only strengthened the practice of legal reification.

Some entrepreneurial types soon grasped that the new program offered interesting possibilities and they went to the ejidos to offer their services in developing the IER, in exchange for substantial payment. For example, the SRA office in Autlán offered its services to several neighbouring ejidos, for 20 million pesos (\$7,000). They had also told some ejidatarios that La Canoa would have to pay 20 million pesos for assistance with the IER if the committee did not succeed in doing the job on its own. In other ejidos, people from outside the region arrived to offer their assistance with the IER and charged large sums of money. However, some officials of the SARH (the former Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources) office in El Grullo became aware of this and managed to convince the ejidatarios not to work with these people. A drawback for these entrepreneurial types was that in many ejidos the ejidatarios didn't see the value of developing the IER. So, these types threatened the ejidatarios that without an IER they wouldn't get credit from the banks anymore. Although this threat seemed to work in some cases, in most ejidos the people were not impressed, and the price for assistance with the IERs dropped (in the Autlán region, the price fell from 20 million pesos [\$7,000] to between three and five million pesos [\$1,000 and 1,700]). Officials of the PA office in Autlán were very well aware of what was going on. However, there had been many tensions between the PA and the SRA and the PA office was operating very carefully and trying to avoid conflict with the SRA office in Autlán. So, there was little support for the ejidatarios from that side.

When the two older ejidatarios on the IER committee of La Canoa withdrew from further activities, I was left on the committee with two young men who were not even ejidatarios. So, there seemed little reason to continue with the job. Furthermore, most ejidatarios did not show any interest in the project and I myself did not believe in the usefulness of more rules. However, the ejido commissioner Raúl urged us to go on. He was afraid that otherwise the officials of the SRA office in Autlán would take over and charge the ejido a large sum of money. So we continued the work and I was amazed by the zeal and enthusiasm of the two young men, who clearly hoped to become ejidatarios in the future. The work on the IER led to many interesting discussions in a small group of ejidatarios. Yet, the majority of ejidatarios showed no interest in this project of new ejido rules.

At the request of the ejido commissioner, Raúl, I had gathered together some IERs of other ejidos and on the basis of the agrarian law and these examples we formulated a framework in which the local rules could easily be integrated. After several discussions in small groups we elaborated a provisional IER in which the local ideas were “translated” into a formalist legal terminology. The idea was that this provisional IER would be discussed at the ejido assembly, which would take the final decisions about the different rules. When we visited Raúl to discuss this provisional document, Raúl did not react very much. After asking several times what he thought about it, he said that several things were unclear to him. On further questioning it became apparent that he had not understood anything of the formal language. As it seemed ridiculous to have an IER that not even the ejido commissioner was able to understand, we talked about the possibility of writing a short IER in everyday language for use in the ejido and a formal legalist IER in order to deal with institutions. The commissioner was very enthusiastic about that idea.

In conversations with officials at the headquarters of the PA in Mexico City in August 1993, I learned that they were well aware of what was going on in the field with respect to the IER program. Two young lawyers working for Arturo Warman realized that not only was the IER program failing to promote the new ideology of an independent ejidatario, it was creating new opportunities for people who wanted to exploit ejidatarios. Their boss Fabiola, who was an anthropologist and part of the head team of the PA, had just returned from a meeting with Warman and said:

I just received orders to work further on an instruction booklet for the IER. We wanted to distance ourselves from former practices in which the SRA dictated everything. We wanted the ejidatarios to do it themselves. It now appears that it did not work that way. The regional assistance offices of the SRA jumped in and now ask for money from the ejidatarios: they sell IERs. For that reason we decided to make an instruction booklet after all.

So, the central office of the PA had finally decided to publish a booklet in which the project of the IER was explained and in which a sample of IERs was presented which the ejidatarios could copy, filling in sections where there was room for variation. Hence, the IER project had turned into an arena of conflict between different institutions of the agrarian bureaucracy (the SRA, the RAN, the PA), and in which some

ejidos were the “victims.” When I returned to La Canoa, I informed them about this latest development and they decided to wait for the new PA booklet before continuing with the IER.

One day when I was working in the local ejido archive of La Canoa, I was amazed when I suddenly found an IER of the ejido that had been elaborated two years before. I showed it to the ejido commissioner who was also surprised and said that he had not known of its existence. He asked me to read it and explain what it said to him. I talked about it with other ejidatarios but only some seemed to remember that a couple of years ago, some people talked about an IER. But nothing more was heard and it was never presented at a general assembly. The IER had been elaborated by an official of the SRA office in Autlán and was very extensive and well done. Many of the rules that the ejidatarios wanted to include in the new IER, such as fines for people who did not attend the meetings, were already in this IER. After having found this IER, I became even more convinced that the formulation of more new rules was a useless endeavor.

The PA booklet about the IER appeared in December 1993, almost a year after the IER project had begun in the Autlán region. As the PA published the booklet, most ejidatarios never learned of its existence; the IER projects in Autlán were in the hands of the SRA. We had some more meetings in La Canoa and, using the booklet, we made a provisional IER. At the SRA office in Guadalajara we heard that specialized assistants were soon going to be sent to the region to give free help with the IERs. The ejidatarios decided to wait for the assistance of this specialized SRA official from Guadalajara to do the final work. By now Manuel, the head of the SRA office in Autlán, had become very angry with our “laziness” and everybody tried to avoid him.

However, in March 1994 Manuel arrived at a meeting in the ejido together with a SRA official from Guadalajara. The young official presented himself and explained that he had been sent with the special task of helping ejidos with the IERs. He would be the person responsible for the IER in the region of Autlán. I was finishing my fieldwork period in the region and I could not participate in the meetings with this official. But the ejidatarios later told me that they had several good meetings with him and that he finally finished the IER. Afterwards, when I returned to La Canoa it was obvious that, despite new rules, nothing had changed in the management of the ejido. Most ejidatarios did not know the new rules, or even that new rules had been formulated.

## Conclusion: Local Organization, Participation and the Role of the Anthropologist

Local organization is often presented as the solution to a wide range of developmental problems. In this same vein, development workers and government officials often label existing forms of organizing as chaotic and corrupt. However, it can be argued that both the labelling of existing organizing practices as “disorganized,” and the widespread belief that “modern,” “democratic” and “collective” forms of organization can improve the situation of poor peasants, form part of broader discourses of development (Apthorpe and Gasper, 1996; cf. Escobar, 1995; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997). In these discourses “development narratives” are created—“broad explanatory narratives that can be operationalized into standard approaches with widespread application” (Roe, 1991: 288) and that mobilize action. Examples include manuals for participatory learning approaches, training of focus groups and building of local organizations. In effect, these simplifying stories have the general characteristic of de-politicizing development issues and intervention itself.

The de-politicizing effects of discourses of participation and local organization became very clear in the case of the program of the Internal Ejido Rules in Mexico. In Mexico officials depict ejidatarios as uneducated, lacking initiative and uncooperative. This figure of the “distrustful and distant” ejidatario deeply informs the thinking of bureaucrats and is reinforced by their experiences with ejidatarios in their daily work. Ejidatarios often do not show much interest in new government programs or in the bureaucrats’ explanation of them. Although this skeptical attitude is the outcome of ejidatarios’ past experiences with government programs, officials interpret this wait-and-see stance as a sign that ejidatarios do not take any interest in their own development. Hence, officials stress the need to raise the consciousness of the ejidatarios about their own situation and the importance of high levels of participation in programs that personally concern them.

The Salinas’ propaganda that ejidatarios should become independent and self-reliant linked up with the officials’ image of ejidatarios as ignorant and in need of empowerment. The new programs for the ejido sector heavily drew on the discourses of consciousness raising, education and local organization. As we saw, this formed part of a broader institutional project in which a new agrarian institute, the PA, was created, alongside the SRA. The PA was presented as an institute that would

introduce a new style of government intervention forging new types of relationships between people and the state. The IER program—in which ejidatarios had to show their own “organizing capacities”—was one of the programs within this new intervention package. However, the IER program overlooked the ways in which existing informal organizing practices in the ejidos became firmly established over the years. In addition, it obviously did not address the fact that the long history of state intervention in rural areas has shaped state-peasant relations in rather conflictive ways.

In La Canoa the IER project had the effect that ejidatarios tried to resist as long as possible the interference of possibly “corrupt” officials. They especially tried to keep the SRA at a distance when they noticed that some of these officials asked for money from other ejidos in the region in exchange for their assistance with the IER. In the end, this program only led to the reshuffling of money within the agrarian bureaucracy and to institutional fights between different state agencies. For the organizing practices in the ejido—which was the official aim of the IER project—it did not have any effect at all. The propaganda of a “new bureaucratic style” could not change established patterns of relations between ejidatarios and officials that had acquired a distinct logic over time. Although the law was changed and a new institute was established, situations soon returned to “normal” and the old stereotypes of the lazy ejidatarios and the unreliable officials were reinforced in the interactions between ejidatarios and officials.

For anthropologists moving between academic work and more applied development work the relation between anthropological theory and development practice can be a troublesome issue. Anthropologists can fulfil many different roles in the development scene. As we saw, in some situations the anthropologist may be enrolled as an information-broker or a buffer between peasants and government officials. In other instances, anthropologists are asked to help design development programs for government agencies, NGOs, or institutions such as the FAO and the World Bank. I always felt very uncomfortable when officials in Mexico asked me to suggest new government programs for the ejido sector. After so many years of study, they felt that I should at least be able to formulate ideas for new development projects. However, in my role as “detached observer” I had arrived at the conclusion that the problem was not a lack of good ideas but the political context in which programs were implemented and the way in which intervention was always appropriated in unintended ways within a political play of clientelistic and personalistic



relations. Although many could understand the point that I made, it obviously did not answer their request for new policy guidelines.

In my view, independently of the specific role he or she takes, an important task of the anthropologist is to keep a critical stance towards discourses and practices of development. As Pottier argues, “a commitment to participatory appraisal and research must not tempt anthropologists away from their conventional task and role. Especially, they must continue to contextualize research activities and events, reflect on how knowledge is produced and write it all down as reflexive ethnography” (1997: 203). With respect to the discussions on participation and organization, it means that one should not uncritically use these terms, but instead study the meanings they acquire in certain political and institutional projects and the role they play in intervention processes. In this sense, the distance that exists between academic anthropology and more applied work—and which is lamented by many—can be a necessary and healthy one.

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## Notes

- 1 The study of the Internal Ejido Rules was part of a bigger PhD research project concerned with the way in which organizing practices with respect to access and distribution of lands had developed in the ejido La Canoa since its establishment in 1938. This project was conducted by long term ethnographic research in the ejido and several government agencies from 1991 to mid-1995. The research was financed by WOTRO (the Netherlands foundation for the advancement of tropical research). The study of participatory approaches was further developed when the author participated in a FAO pilot research project that studied the links between rural households income generating strategies and local institutions in three areas in India, Mozambique and Mexico. The continuing study of institutions and natural resource management has been made possible by a fellowship of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences.
- 2 In the literature the terms institution and organization are often used interchangeably. At the same time, subdisciplines, such as organization sociology, new institutional economics, economic sociology and economic anthropology use the concepts in very specific and different ways. The fact that these concepts form part of different theoretical frameworks can make discussions very confusing. Comparing the use of the concepts, one finds that most works that try to distinguish organizations from institutions stress the normative aspects of institutions while for organizations the structural part is stressed.

- 3 The PRA is above all based on qualitative methods and several of these find their origin in anthropological fieldwork, such as visits to and talks with community leaders and organization representatives, at random informal interviews with different people of the community, open interviews with "key-informants," semi-structured interviews with topic lists, informal group talks, directly observing local conditions.
- 4 This strong orientation towards the group and group learning processes is even stronger in the participating Learning and Action Approach (PLA) developed by Pretty, Guijt, Thompson and Scoones (1995) which is about training sessions and the creation of learning environments in workshops for development.
- 5 For the sake of anonymity, the name of the ejido as well as the names of all the persons appearing in the ethnography have been changed.
- 6 INEGI, 1991, XI Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 1990. Jalisco. Resultados definitivos. Datos por Localidad (Integración Territorial).
- 7 The Mexican agrarian law has been changed several times this century. However, the main characteristics of the ejido regime were not changed between 1917 and 1992. The main institution that took care of agrarian affairs and the procurement of agrarian justice has been renamed and reorganized several times since 1915. In 1974 it became the Ministry of Agrarian Reform (Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria).
- 8 Fairhead and Leach also show that environmental management often depends less on community-level authorities and sociocultural organizations than on the sum of a much more diffuse set of relations: a constellation more than a structure (1995: 1027).
- 9 During the Mexican Land Reform not all ejidos received the final map that indicated the borders with their neighbours. The individual ejido plots had never been measured before.
- 10 When the majority of ejido plots has been measured, the ejido assembly can authorize the concerning ejidatarios to adopt full domain over their plots. If all ejido members decide to adopt full domain over their plots the ejido regime comes to an end. Only if 20% of the ejidatarios or 20 ejidatarios decide to continue, they can continue as ejido.

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