CONSTRUCTING GLOCAL NETWORKS
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS:
Lessons From Chiapas
Indigenous Communities in Resistance

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Introduction

On Sunday, March 11, 2001, about 200,000 indigenous, mestizo and foreign people filled the Zócalo, the main square of Mexico City. They gathered urging the newly formed government of President Vicente Fox to recognize the rights and the cultures of more than 10 million Mexican indigenous people. Subcomandante Marcos and the 23 comandantes of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), the rebellious group that emerged in 1994, arrived in the Zócalo after a two-weeks long march involving meetings across twelve Mexican states. Local and international media focused on the indigenous groups and on the challenges they present to the new administration. Yet little noticed was the presence of numerous Americans, Canadians and Europeans participating in these events in support of the Zapatistas’ demands and of the indigenous people’s claims for the recognition of their identities and rights. The intensification of networks between indigenous and international nongovernmental organizations has been identified as the emerging ‘global civil society’, facilitated by the use of electronic communication.2 Clearly, the Internet and other forms of rapid communications facilitated the organization of international campaigns pressuring local government and preventing a possible escalation of human rights violations. Yet little has been said about the intensification of international presence among indigenous communities in the Highlands and Lacandon forest of Chiapas.

Since the beginning of the Mexican government campaign to repress Zapatista communities, international presence has played a determinant role in documenting and preventing human rights violations. Yet, the effects of foreign people go beyond defending indigenous communities from military and paramilitary threats. But what are these effects at local and global level? This paper offers specific examples of international presence and their human rights effects for refugee camps of Las Abejas, a recently emerged Christian pacifist movement, identify themselves with the EZLN’s demands but do not support armed struggle. Based on data collected between 1998 and 1999, the author argues that indigenous-foreign relations encourage the international community to view human rights in its cultural and religious meanings. In addition, indigenous-foreign relations support indigenous women rights and their struggle for liberation within their communities and families.

Las Abejas, although less known than the EZLN, became internationally known as the group targeted in the Acteal massacre, the cruelest human rights violation that occurred in Chiapas since 1994. On December 22, 1997, 45 Abejas, mostly women and children, were brutally massacred in the village of Acteal by an Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) affiliated paramilitary group recognized as Red Masks.3 After this tragic experience the Las Abejas movement chose to positively continue their option for nonviolent resistance with the support of a constant presence of Mexican and foreign human rights observers. The interaction between local indigenous communities and organizations with the personal experiences and organizational contacts represented by Mexican and foreign observers created the social opportunities for the implementation of vital transnational networks for human rights. While numerous authors recognize the Mexican democratization process independently from international pressures others focus specifically on how international pressures can implement domestic changes toward democratization and respect for human rights.4

A more accurate description of the situation is that both the global-international and the local-indigenous social forces, movements and organizations equally participate in the creation of intense networks of communication around important frameworks such as human rights. Las Abejas’ dynamics of resistance employ moving between the local and the global, reflecting what Roland Robertson as recently identified as “the globalization of the local and the localization of the global.” 

Acteal, a very remote locality in the Highlands of Chiapas, has been projected into the global arena of international human rights concern. At the same time, the indigenous people currently living as refugees in Acteal experience international cultural diversity by visiting and interacting with the human rights observers present in their camps. The effects of the Japanese notion of dochaku, or glocalism, are clearly observable in the Las Abejas’ transformation of their collective identities and actions of resistance around transnational themes such as human rights.

**The Human Rights Framework: Las Abejas as an Indigenous Rights Movement**

Las Abejas construction of human rights networks is explained by the recent growing importance of human rights and indigenous rights both in Mexico and around the world. Observing the case of Mexico we see how the work for human rights made by local and regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are just as fundamental as the pressure produced by international and foreign organizations to governments. In Mexican history, one of the most serious episodes of human rights violations occurred in October 1968 when army troops opened fire on a peaceful student demonstration killing about five hundred students and wounding more than two thousand. Despite this incident and the continue disappearances of people registered in the 1970s and mid 1980s, Mexico was never considered in this progressive stance on human rights. Indeed, other human rights tragedies such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Chile occupied the recently created international human rights network. However, the lack of international response was also cause by the absence of local human rights NGOs in Mexico. In the mid-to-late 1980s, as human rights consciousness began to penetrate Mexican civil society, Mexican NGOs working for human rights rapidly grew in number from only four in 1984 to more than two hundred in 1996. National and international networks of communication around Latin American social, political and economic rights began to expand by the mid1980s. At the same time, the indigenous rights network began to expand as numerous intercontinental encounters reasserted indigenous rights to cultural identity, self-determination and autonomy. In particular, the NGO alternative meetings organized parallel to the UN sponsored conferences in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Vienna in 1993, and Cairo in 1994 strengthened numerous networks of resistance that later directed their effort in support of the indigenous people of Chiapas. International networks made it possible to transform negative realities of human rights violations into strength for the indigenous communities and organizations of Chiapas. Thanks to the support of these numerous

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movements, *Las Abejas' local experience and knowledge has catapulted them into the global arena changing the slogan ‘act locally and think globally’ into ‘think locally and act globally’*

Recently, the international community has recognized human rights violations against indigenous people of Chiapas as particularly critical because they affect not only their civil, political, social and economic rights, but also their cultural identity and existence as a people. Acknowledging how governmental and nongovernmental organizations pressure the Mexican state around the issue of human and indigenous rights, *Las Abejas* was able to frame their struggle around human rights issues. Encouraged by the EZLN ability to create national and international networks, *Las Abejas* have also made its voice heard in Mexico and the world thanks to the support of the San Cristóbal de Las Casas (SCLC) Diocese and its Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (FraiBa).

The concept of respect for indigenous rights is revolutionary in Chiapas. For example, until just recently in 1994, indigenous people had to look down when they passed a *Ladino* person. If they were walking on the high, narrow sidewalks of San Cristóbal, “they had to step off the sidewalk on to the street in order to give priority to the non-indigenous person.” The word “rights” does not exist in Maya Tzotzil language. In their discussions, Tzotzil communities of *Las Abejas* had to borrow the Spanish word “derechos.” Yet, they clearly recognize the connection of their culture with their rights and identity as indigenous people. As one of *Las Abejas* founders told me: “When we speak of Mayan culture, we renew our identity and recognize our rights as indigenous people.”

The 1997 massacre of Acteal was the largest human rights violation episode since the beginning of the Zapatista conflict in 1994. The preexisting presences of political, religious and human rights regional and international organizations (promoted by the progressive church of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia and by the charismatic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos) facilitated *Las Abejas*’ entering into the national and international networks for human and indigenous rights. During the next three years, *Las Abejas*’ organization became aware of the strategic importance that human and indigenous rights have for establishing networks of communication at local, regional and global levels. Working against the government’s strategy of localizing and isolating a conflict, *Las Abejas* increased its capacity to communicate human rights violation through the mediation of local and regional agencies and recently even by directly communicating with international governmental and nongovernmental human rights organizations (Figure 1).

Through an efficient network of communication, *Las Abejas* is able to report local episodes of human right violations to regional and international organizations, which often represent the

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11 *Ladinos* indicates mixed-blood people. It is a term more frequently used in Chiapas and Guatemala to identify non-Indians. In Chiapas, the being *Ladino* is related to cultural identity and economic status more than ethnicity and race. In Mexico is commonly used the word *mestizos*, which has an analogous meaning.

12 Interview with a SCLC Diocese’s pastoral agent, August 24, 1999. Throughout this paper I will not specify the names of the people I interviewed to avoid compromising the individuals and the organizations involved. With the exception of public figures and known places, names will be generally omitted or changed.

13 Interview with a *Las Abejas* founder, July 15, 1999.


15 Interview with a *Las Abejas* founder, July 15, 1999.
only form of protection against the violence of state and other powerful agents. As Michael Kearney states:

Numerous indigenous groups have been able to reframe their disadvantaged relationship with the nation-state that encompasses them by redefining their projects in the global space of environmentalism and human rights… and by defining their problems in terms of violations of their human rights, many indigenous groups have been able to gain support from the international human rights movement, which is able to pump pressure on renegade states that abuse indigenous people. 16

The FraiBa has a fundamental role in providing support to indigenous organizations and integrating their limited structures of communication. The center was founded on March 19, 1989, as a concrete answer to the indigenous communities’ demands for justice and respect of human dignity. 17

Las Abejas needed the assistance of the FraiBa for two main reasons. First, they needed juridical assistance to defend the rights of the families of the victims as well as to quantify the material damages to displaced families. Second, Las Abejas’ denunciation of human rights violations needed to be networked at state, national and international levels. Today, the FraiBa still plays an important mediating role between Las Abejas and numerous national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations working for human rights. However, as Las Abejas increased their own public relations, they were able to establish direct links of communication with national and international organizations (Figure 1).

Since 1998, Las Abejas entered into a worldwide network of communication with national and international NGOs, mostly working around issues of human and indigenous rights. Through the FraiBa, the SCLC Diocese, local and international NGOs, Las Abejas was able to establish several contacts with American, Canadian and Mexican NGOs. As a result of the international reaction to the Acteal massacre, Las Abejas acquired new opportunities to place their claims for justice and respect for human rights at national and international level. Stimulated by numerous visits of international human rights observers, delegations, and trips outside of Chiapas, Las Abejas’ original local injustice concerns soon connected to global concerns for human rights, women rights and nonviolence.

The Presence of International Human Rights Observers

Since the beginning of the Zapatista National Liberation Army’s rebellion in January 1994, thousands of human rights observers have come to Chiapas. 18 Sent by Mexican and international NGOs and coordinated by the FraiBa and Enlace Civil, they represented a

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18 Mario Monroy, ed., Pensar Chiapas, Repensar México: Reflexiones de las ONGs Mexicanas Sobre el Conflicto (Mexico City: Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia, 1994).
concrete response to a dramatic increase of human rights violations registered among indigenous communities in the Highlands, Lacandon and Northern regions of Chiapas. Although it could be argued that Highlands indigenous communities never lived in isolation, the coming of human rights observers and delegations from various countries explains how indigenous people transformed their perception of ‘being-in-the-world.’ As a pastoral worker of the SCLC Diocese remarked:

> [In the refugee camp of Acteal] with the coming and going of so many people from all over the world […] people of Las Abejas] were able to create from nothing tremendous relationships. I saw how the previous Mesa Directiva (directive board) started the tradition of keeping a record of all the people visiting Acteal on a world map. With lines of different colors, they linked the pin placed in Acteal to their visitors’ cities and countries. That map, which is still hanging in the Las Abejas office in Acteal, is emblematic of the transformation they have been living as a people. They were able to situate themselves in the world and by locating where other people were coming from, they were opening themselves to the world… They even sent a letter to people in Kosovo and they even had people coming here from Australia.

Intensified cross-cultural encounters with international human rights observers advance indigenous communities’ perception of themselves in the world and allow them to reassert themselves in their collective identity of indigenous nonviolent resisters. The frequent visits of Mexican and foreign delegations in Acteal make members of the organization Las Abejas believe that “Acteal […] is at the center of the world” and that “[Las Abejas] has received from God the particular vocation of bringing peace to Chiapas and the world… even at the price of their blood.” The cross-cultural encounters between foreign human rights observers and indigenous communities in resistance reflect the so-called globalization/localization dynamics of compression and expansion, which numerous scholars have recognized as fundamental elements for explaining how new social movements construct their identity and action. The implementation of transnational grassroots networks in response to the worsening of socio-economic and human rights conditions caused by neoliberal impositions encouraged numerous members of grassroots organizations to create international solidarity by sending delegations, observers and inviting indigenous representatives for speaking tours in the US, Canada and Europe. Today, global networks are closely linked to local struggle thanks to the use of electronic communication, including e-mail and the Internet, along with more increasingly accessibility national and international travel. Nevertheless, while these means and experiences affect only a few representatives of the organization, the presence of international observers impacts the whole community. As a displaced woman observed:

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21 Interview with a SCLC Diocese’s pastoral agent, August 25, 1999.
23 Interview with a Las Abejas leader, November 20, 1999.
24 Interview with a Las Abejas woman in leadership, December 10, 1999.
We are happy when the campamentistas [international observers] are among us. We feel safer with them and we are glad we can share our stories with them. Even though some of us do not speak Spanish… [or even] some of them do not speak Spanish, but we are able to know more about their stories too… and of their families and how they live where they come from. We are happy our children can learn from them too.\textsuperscript{27}

In their accompaniment of local workers and indigenous communities in resistance, international observers had to document the testimonies and incidents of human rights violations. But their principal task is to be present in the communities, staying visible in the area in order to prevent possible attacks of armed groups, paramilitaries, or the Mexican Army. The international presence of human rights observers and delegations significantly increased in the Chenalhó refugee camps after the Acteal massacre in December 1997.

Since then, numerous local and international NGOs working in the Highlands witnessed an intensification of military stations among indigenous communities in resistance. Identifying these moves as part of the government’s low intensity warfare, Las Abejas, the EZLN and numerous NGOs requested international observers to protect communities in resistance.\textsuperscript{28} According to Las Abejas’ testimonies, the constant presence of international observers in the refugee camps of Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen has “prevented the escalation of the conflict and comforted the ‘sad hearts’ of displaced families”.\textsuperscript{29}

Global Exchange and other NGOs have documented how Mexican and foreign human rights observers in remote communities in Chiapas have been an important factor in limiting the physical and emotional violence to indigenous organizations and communities who oppose the government.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Figure 2: Presence of International Human Rights Observers}

\textit{(Two-Years Period After the Acteal Massacre: January 1998 - December 1999)}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Interview with a Las Abejas displaced woman, August 2, 1999.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Martha Patricia Lopez, \textit{La Guerra de Baja Intensidad en México} (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana and Plaza y Valdés, 1996); Mercedes Olivera Bustamante, “Acteal: Los Efectos de la Guerra de Baja Intensidad” In \textit{La Otra Palabra: Mujeres y Violencia en Chiapas, Antes y Después de Acteal}, eds. Hernández Castillo and Rosalva Aida (Mexico City: CIESAS, COLEM, CIAM, 1998); Coordination of Non-Governmental Organization for Peace (CONPAZ), Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center and Coalition of Civil Organizations for Democracy (Convergencia), \textit{Militarization and Violence in Chiapas} (Mexico D.F.: Impretei, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{29} Interview with a Las Abejas displaced woman, July 22, 1999.
\end{itemize}
International observers also attempted to insure that the policy of genocidal warfare that occurred in neighboring Guatemala did not repeat itself in Mexico. After the Acteal massacre, *Las Abejas* began using electronic communication to spread their communiqués, reporting on their condition, denouncing the material and intellectual authors of the massacre, and inviting the international community to support them in their resistance. Initially, numerous NGOs, including the Fay Bartolomé Human Rights Center, the National Commission of Intermediation (CONAI), and the Diocesan Office of Communication, provided *Las Abejas* with the necessary materials for communication. Later, international and foreign NGOs such as Witness for Peace, International Service for Peace (SIPAZ), Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), and the Bruderhof Foundation initiated specific trainings to empower the organization in their ability to better use multimedia and electronic communication.\(^{31}\)

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Although human rights observers do not generally teach or train in the indigenous communities, their presence is often a bridge for establishing specific educational and solidarity projects with a variety of grassroots and non-governmental organizations at regional, national and international levels (see Figure 4). *Las Abejas* struggle for human, indigenous and women rights, along with their nonviolent, religious and political identity as neozapatista movement, constituted essential frameworks for the constitution of global/local (glocal) networks.

Human rights observers are particularly needed and appreciated for their ‘presence’ or ‘accompaniment’ to indigenous communities. Their role is to be a visible presence, accompanying local human rights workers and other organizations that face danger from local, national or international forces. According to Peace Brigades International (PBI), one of the first organizations to engage in similar initiatives, human rights observers are like ‘unarmed bodyguards’. The premise of accompaniment is that there will be an international response to whatever violence a volunteer witness. International observers coordinated by

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the FraiBa are expected to document eventual violations of human rights, especially through their testimonies, photos and audiotapes. 34

Figure 4: Network Expansion After the Acteal Massacre (December 22, 1997)

Before Acteal
CARITAS
CDHFBC (FRAIBA)
CNDH
EZLN
INI
MEXICAN RED CROSS

After Acteal
ALIANZA CIVICA
ALLIANCE FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE
BRUDENDORF FOUNDATION
CHRISTIAN PEACEMAKER TEAMS
CLOUDFOREST INITIATIVES
COALITION FOR INDIGENOUS RIGHTS
DARK NIGHTS FIELDNOTES
EPICA
EQUAL EXCHANGE
EUROPEAN UNION
FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION
GLOBAL EXCHANGE
HABITAT FOR HUMANITY
INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS
INTERNATIONAL SERVICE FOR PEACE
JESUITS
MEDICOS DEL MUNDO
MEXICO SOLIDARITY NETWORK
MICHIGAN PEACEMAKER TEAMS
PASTORS FOR PEACE
PLUSHER MOVEMENT
QUAKERS OF AMERICAN FRIENDS
SERAJ
SIPAZ
SISTER COMMUNITY TUZTLA

In the case of the Las Abejas refugee camps in Chenalhó, human rights observers are particularly helpful for the release of fear and anxiety. "When the campamentistas are present, [Las Abejas’ people] feel more secure and they are not afraid of leaving women alone in the community." 35 Nevertheless, Las Abejas refugee people in Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen perceive the presence of human rights observers particularly important for establishing networks of communications with the international community and avoiding isolation. As the representative of the Mesa Directiva comments:

The international observers and delegations are a very important presence for us. Militaries and paramilitaries try to isolate our communities, but thanks to their constant arrival here, we can keep informed about the world. Also because it’s very difficult for us to go out to say our stories, the people who visit us speak for us in their communities. They have supported us a lot when they speak of us in their countries. They themselves experience the harassment of militaries and paramilitaries. They can hear our sufferings, they can see our tears, and they can feel our fears of living displaced surrounded by militaries and paramilitaries. They can see

34 Interview with a FRAIBA coordinator, October 26, 1999.
35 Ibid.
beyond that mask of the government when they lie saying there is energy, roads and food. It’s good they can see these are all lies.\(^3^6\)

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) has a group of international observers in Chiapas. Similar to other organizations coordinated by FraiBa, CPT maintains its presence in conflict situation documenting and preventing human rights violations. Although rooted in the Anabaptist movement’s historic experience of nonviolent resistance, CPT is still a new and developing organization.\(^3^7\) Nevertheless, their identity as “active peacemakers” characterized by their religious worldview and by the local context of the struggle, reflects numerous characteristics common to both indigenous and international nonviolent organizations.\(^3^8\)

The human rights observers coordinated by the FraiBa, also called campamentistas, have different characteristics and objectives than CPT. First, campamentistas generally stay for a period of two weeks in the communities and then leave, while CPTers stay for periods of three months maintaining a continuous and personal relationship with Las Abejas. Many of them return to Chiapas after a few months. Second, the goal of campamentistas is to witness eventual human rights abuses or military invasions but rarely to intervene directly. CPTers, on the other hand, promote and sustain local direct nonviolent actions of resistance. Third, campamentistas rarely participate in social and spiritual events of the indigenous community. CPTers instead are recognized by their active participation. Fourth, CPTers systematically report news, appeals and actions on the Internet and they develop campaigns for Chiapas in the United States, Canada and other countries. Finally, CPTers work as a community, which is quite different from other international observers who are sometimes unprepared to live, discuss and act together as teams.\(^3^9\) These similar characteristics have favored the creation of important bridges of communication, implementing local and international networks.

Furthermore, the specific nonviolent training CPTers have had and the contentiously open character of their presence differs from other NGOs stationed in Chiapas. However, it reflects, in certain aspects, Las Abejas’ way of doing resistance. CPT coordinator Kryss Chupp explains:

> Actions speak louder than words… CPTers expose themselves to risk and in this we get somehow closer to the people’s sufferings and struggles. We are willing to go into places that other local and international NGOs define as “too dangerous.” We are not afraid of the military checkpoints because we are not afraid of being expelled. This is also part of the resistance. It takes a while to explain this to other organizations and even Las Abejas, used to the more careful behavior of other NGOs, who do not always understand that being deported, getting arrested, pushing away militaries, is part of who we are. This is why we can get so close to Las Abejas, because we are very similar in the way we do resistance. But as international people, it is only by being visible that we can deter violence.\(^4^0\)

Although most FraiBa coordinated campamentistas also come from faith based organizations, it is CPT’s religious identity that particularly distinguishes their relationship with Las Abejas. A nonviolent interpretation of Christianity facilitated understanding between the two organizations that collaborated in numerous nonviolent initiatives of resistance. As nonviolent indigenous people who organize their actions of resistance around their faith and spiritual dignity, Las Abejas easily identify with a foreign organization like CPT which also resists nonviolently and base their actions on their faith. This common ground of nonviolent spirituality and resistance opens the doors for deeper relationships and dialogues. Spirituality

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\(^{36}\) Focus group with Mesa Directiva and representatives of Las Abejas, October 30, 1999.


\(^{38}\) For a more detailed description of purposes and activities of CPT group in Chiapas see their web page at: http://www.prairienet.org/cpt/mexico.html

\(^{39}\) According to a FRAIBA coordinator, “Most campamentistas find it very hard to live together for two weeks in a stressful situation.” Interview with a FRAIBA coordinator, October 26, 1999.

\(^{40}\) Interview with CPT coordinator, Kryss Chupp, May 09, 2000.
becomes the foundation for inter-organizational relationships. It is particularly in the common participation to public religious manifestations as actions of resistance CPTers and Abejas establish a bond and learn from each other. As CPT founder and director Gene Stolzfus explains:

During the vigils at the military checkpoints, we really created a bond. They asked us to share our stories of resistance. We learned so much about each other by simply sharing stories... I remember we started a very deep conversation on dreams with two catechists of Las Abejas while we were fasting at the military camp in Xoyep. We shared our dreams and I learned so much about their spirituality during our dialogue.41

Beyond their specific goals and characteristics, the presence of human rights observers of the FraiBa and of nonviolent groups of CPT produced important results, particularly in the field of human rights. In the following section, I take into consideration how the presence of human rights observers furthers the understanding of human rights at both global and local levels. Following the direction local - global, it is observable how Las Abejas challenges international organizations to enlarge their view of human rights, focusing on other important aspects such as their religious-cultural and communitarian-social aspects of indigenous rights. In the direction global - local, international organizations support indigenous women in their demands for interpreting indigenous collective customs and traditions while respecting women’s rights and dignity.

A Local - Global Effect: Recognizing Indigenous Rights and Culture

Along with the critique of several non-Western scholars, many indigenous groups have also recognized the fundamental importance of social, economic, collective and cultural rights. 42 Las Abejas and the indigenous people of Chiapas remind us that the ‘Western’ definition of human rights, as expressed in 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are mostly individual and civil-politically oriented. 43 With the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s, the human rights situation in Mexico, primarily civil and political rights, were considered an important element for the transition to democracy. 44 Nevertheless, the cultural, social and economic significance of communal land for the indigenous communities of Mexico was practically ignored by the Mexican, US and Canadian governments. 45 Las Abejas, the EZLN and numerous Mexican organizations in resistance understand that it will be quite difficult respecting basic economic and cultural rights under the current global economic system embraced by Mexico’s neoliberal reforms.

41 Interview with Gene Stolzfus, founder and director of CPT, June 12, 2000.
43 For critiques of human rights formulation as ethnocentrically Western, see the documents that emerged during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. Many cultures and nations have recognized that regional, historical, cultural and religious differences should be taken into account in human rights standards. Among numerous studies on this subject see: Jack Donnelly, “Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Rights and Conceptions,” American Political Science Review 76 (1992): 303-316; John Kelsay and Summer Twiss, Religion and Human Rights (New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1994).
Most Mexican and international NGOs working in solidarity with Chiapas totally support Las Abejas and the EZLN claims for land, justice and democracy. The specific contribution of Las Abejas to current interpretations of international human rights is in relation to their religious and cultural identity. Las Abejas, although fully supporting the Zapatista demands and the more political-juridical understanding of human rights represented by the FraiBa, reflects a perspective on human rights directly related to the Tzotzil religious and cultural worldviews.

At times, the religious and cultural aspects are so tied to their understandings of human rights that it is not perceived by national and international non-indigenous human rights organizations. As Father Pedro Arriaga, SJ the current parish priest of Chenalhó, in the Highlands of Chiapas, observes:

The religious dimension of Las Abejas is not separable from reality and it is a fundamental part of their view of human rights. The Column of Infamy, for example, [a sculpture] placed in Acteal by a Danish artist to signify the horror for the government violation of human rights, does not only hold this meaning for Las Abejas. For them, it becomes a symbol of their unity as a people in resistance who cannot be defeated even if they are killed. Furthermore, the column has a sacred meaning beyond its social and cultural symbolism. It represents the sacredness of the land of Acteal where their martyrs are buried… For Las Abejas, human and indigenous rights are always mingled with their spiritual worldviews.

The 1996 San Andrés Agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture remain the best description on how indigenous communities of Chiapas interpret human rights. Although discussed, elaborated and signed by both the EZLN and members of the Concord and Pacification Commission (COCOPA) representing the federal government, the Mexican government never fulfilled them and until now, it was not able to transform them into legislation. Evidently, the contents of the agreements represent a tremendous political threat and an obstacle to the Mexican and USA neoliberal agenda. The implementation of the San Andrés Agreements would give, not only to the indigenous people of Chiapas but also to the more than 12 million Indígenas in Mexico, the power of self-determination and political, economic and cultural autonomy. It would represent a historic and unprecedented step toward a redefinition of the relationship between the Mexican state and indigenous people. The right to self-determination would inevitably lead to broader participation of indigenous people in policymaking. The agreements would also give the indigenous people the right to control their lands and their natural resources as well as their rights to nurture and implement their diverse cultures, histories and languages.

The San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture demonstrate to the rest of Mexico and to the world that indigenous people exist, have their own identity and demand their rights. Both the accords and the process that produced the accords represent a modern testimony that indigenous people are not just living relics in the globalized future but are

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48 Interview with Fr. Pedro Arriaga, SJ, a Jesuit priest in Chenalhó, September 11, 1999.


social and political actors with a project for the multi-cultural future of humanity. Las Abejas’ people, although identified with a similar cultural background, set an example to the international community for their ability to create coalitions, establish dialogue and include diversity. Referring to them as indigenous helps us to understand that Mexico, as well as the world, needs to recognize their cultural diversity and respect differences.

A Global - Local Effect: Supporting Indigenous Women Rights

The respect of the right of indigenous people with their culture and identity, as repeatedly stated in the San Andrés Accords, is essential for the construction of a pluralist society. However, many challenges are included in it. For instance, the meaning of the terms “usos y costumbres” (customs and traditions), considered central ingredients for the rights of indigenous cultures, could be interpreted as a contradiction in regards to women rights. Indigenous traditions and practices, identified as rights in relation with other cultures, can also be used to justify human rights violations within the community. Hernandez Castillo, for example, compares different cases of human rights violations against Tzotzil women. Government repression of women’s resistance initiatives through rape and ‘sexual torture’ is accompanied by ‘familiar repression’ exemplified by tradition-justified domestic violence.

In a 1994 meeting, indigenous women pointed out the need to change those customs and traditions that deny women their rights:

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The customs that we have should not do harm to anyone... Violence [to women] is not good. ... They were the customs from earlier times, but we also have to change. When we do not want to marry, it is better that we talk with our parents and the man; marriage should not be forced because it ruins the women, worse if there are children later. We do not like the customs that men drink [too much] because then they scold or beat their wives, or spend the money needed for food.... We do not want bad customs.
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At a time when indigenous customs and traditions are considered essential for the promotion and respect of cultural rights in Chiapas, indigenous women are not voices of dissent, but of direction. Their contribution is focusing the community discernment between good and bad customs: “We have to reformulate our customs. The law should protect and promote only the actions and customs examined by the communities and organizations if they are good.”

Women of Las Abejas, the EZLN and numerous other organizations of the Mexican and ‘global’ civil society, agree to assert “their rights to maintain cultural differences, while at the same time, demanding the right to change those traditions that oppress and exclude them.”

For the last ten years, indigenous women of the Highlands of Chiapas established numerous 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

56 Ibid.  
(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.

During the discussion for the San Andres Agreements, organized groups of indigenous women made important contributions toward making indigenous rights inclusive and not contradictory to women rights. The legislative proposal formulated by Concord and Pacification Commission (COCOPA) and the National Commission of Intermediation (CONAI) following the signing of the San Andrés Accords recognized women’s rights as integrated into the respect of indigenous rights:

[Indigenous peoples] have the right… to apply their own normative systems in the regulation and solution of internal conflicts, respecting individual rights, human rights and the dignity and integrity of women.

“Women’s rights with dignity” is the message that Las Abejas women want to share with the rest of the world. When on July 21 and October 22, 1999, Ms. Asma Jahangir and Mary Robinson, respectively the Extra Judicial Arbitration Executor and the High Commissioner of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, visited Chiapas, Las Abejas women shared a symbolic gesture with them. They dressed the visitors in their own huipiles, a symbol of their cultural and suffered identity. Female victims in the Acteal massacre had the same traditional clothing. This gesture expressed Las Abejas’ determination to extend their ‘local’ identity to the international community to gain the respect for indigenous rights. Las Abejas considered these visits important for they represent crucial international support for them and Chiapas. After meeting with the survivors for two hours, the organization Las Abejas gave Ms. Robinson a letter addressed to the United Nations. They appealed to the United Nations to intervene in resolving the conflict in Chiapas, because, they said, “we think the solution is no more in the hands of our governors.” Las Abejas’ struggle for economic, cultural, religious, political and human rights reflect the global claim for respecting diversity and honoring human dignity.

Gender relations within indigenous communities are rapidly changing and encouraged by several external elements including international human rights observers. Along with the Catholic and Protestant churches, also numerous NGOs have been working for the promotion of indigenous women’s rights. Their work has been supported by the presence of foreign human rights observers, which positively encouraged women’s leadership in the community. As a Christian Peacemaker Team woman observes:

In a recent workshop with women from Acteal and Xoyep I heard them saying how foreign women are an example for them of independence. Recently they asked a 40 year old campamentista woman why she was not married and without children. Those different women’s roles are not disruptive to the community. On the contrary, they can be helpful to sustain and accept more situations like Maria in Acteal, that although she is a single mother, she is an active and respected leader in the community. Initially only a few women in the community accepted her. Thanks to the support of the religious women of the Diocese and of

60 Ibid, p. 51.
61 Interview with a Las Abejas woman in leadership, December 10, 1999.
62 Las Abejas Communiqué, 22 October 1999.
numerous NGOs. Now she is such a strong leader in the Las Abejas communities.

The encounters between Las Abejas women and foreign pacifist women help establish important networks to share strategies and relate identities. A woman from the United States told me that by “participating with [Las Abejas women] in their nonviolent actions [she] felt empowered in [her] identity and history as a pacifist woman.” International and indigenous women teach each other the importance of keeping their resistance at both a personal and political level. The act of standing up against immoral actions and laws of institutions is particularly empowering for women in general and for abused women in particular, because “it puts them in touch with their internal powers.” For Las Abejas women, the struggle for human rights is connected to both their conditions as poor and marginalized indigenous communities and to their identity as women, mothers and people in resistance.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the implementation of local and global networks for human rights in Chiapas is favored by human rights observer’s accompaniment of indigenous communities. Foreign presence, promoted by pre-existing local, regional and international networks between organizations and movements, further the understanding of international human rights at both local and global level. In Central America, the international human rights network has not always been helpful in changing the understanding and practice of human rights at state and local level. Although the U.S. Central America Peace Movement organized numerous campaigns denouncing human rights violations, it basically failed to stem massive violations in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s. The questions then remain: Under what conditions can the networks for human rights be effective? What are the long-term effects of foreign presence among indigenous communities? Las Abejas and the larger neozapatista movement of Chiapas offered us important lessons. Local and regional human rights organizations and organized communities are a crucial link for building an effective human rights network. Where local organizational strengths are absent, as in the case of the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City, international organizations for human rights did not pay attention and did not produce much pressure on governments. The ongoing neozapatista rebellion teaches us how both local and global nongovernmental organizations need to be present, active and maintained in communication though electronic mailing, the Internet, frequent delegations and constant presence of human rights observers. Chiapas local networks for human rights have served effectively as carriers of human rights ideas. The local understandings of communitarian, cultural and religious characters of indigenous rights represent a precious contribution to the current debate on international human rights. As Jack Donnelly has argued, taking in consideration moral interests of human rights represents the foundation for understanding and implementing the respect for human rights. For these and numerous other positive effects, indigenous-foreign networks have to be sought for the future implementation of human rights in Chiapas, Mexico and the world.

63 Interview with a CPT member, 6 October 1999.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders, pp.79-120.