

Café La Selva: on the road of life

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Chiapas in Southern Mexico is the country's poorest state, with a long history of upheaval and ongoing social conflict. For generations, the indigenous people of this area have struggled to gain access to land and to raise their living standards. Most farmers are small-scale producers with less than two hectares of land and as coffee is the main cash crop, communities are extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in growing conditions and world market prices.

In 1979, the coffee-farming Tojolabales and Tzeltales communities of Chiapas decided to join forces to strengthen their communities and to improve their living conditions. Together, they founded the *Unión de Ejidos de la Selva*, which now has around 1600 members, all small-scale coffee producers.

The Union started as a reaction to the many problems its members were facing, especially regarding the access to, and secure rights to farmland. They also wanted to ensure that roads were constructed in their area and sought alternative ways to sell their products, in particular coffee, to avoid selling through middlemen.

During the first ten years of its existence, the Union mainly functioned as a social pressure group. As such, it achieved several important results: It managed to gain access to land for its members and to have this land officially registered in the names of the individual members. It also mobilized enough strength to negotiate successfully with the government, helping to ensure that roads were constructed and other important needs of the communities were met. In spite of these successes, the Union experienced serious limitations and was not able to substantively address the core issues that influenced the lives of the member families and their communities. Issues like production methods, resource management and linkages with the market, were unfamiliar topics and at first there were no ideas on how to approach them.

In the late 1980s, the Union started to become more proactive and tried to address the welfare of the member communities. The first efforts concentrated on taking over responsibility for services that the government neglected or carried out inefficiently, such as health care and schools. However, in the longer term it was impossible for the Union to maintain these services. It did not have the necessary technical capacity, knowledge or resources. But the main reason for the Union's initial failure was that it lacked a clear vision of what it wanted to achieve – it was merely copying the development strategies of the government. To make the transition from a social pressure group into an organization that can take its destiny into its own hands, it needed a strategy and an organizational structure which was developed and supported by the member communities on the basis of their own felt needs, interests and objectives.

Developing new strategies and a new organizational structure was a major challenge for the Union. During this process the organization was faced with a serious question: Is it really possible to survive, and to develop the farmer community with the local resources available?

In spite of this uncertainty, the members came to the conclusion that with the close attachment to the land they farm and with the strength of their traditional culture, a positive attitude was the only option, despite the difficulties. The question had to be rephrased: What can we do to be able to continue to live in our rural area with pride and dignity, and how can we make the best use of the local resources available to us?

The members of the Union started to exchange ideas with other communities and tried to understand their experiences. They also renewed their interest in how their parents had lived, and eventually began to develop concrete proposals. The Union had found a clear direction: It needed to design and promote its own development models based on independent management by the community.

These models had to build on the principles of self-sufficiency, cultural traditions and identity, development of local products and direct marketing links with consumers. The models had to be socially accepted, guarantee access to food and generate resources to invest in improvement of the living conditions.

Organic coffee

A first important step for achieving the Union's objectives was to get directly involved in the coffee crop, since it is the main cash crop in Chiapas and the communities depend on it for their survival. The coffee had been conventionally grown in accordance with the advice of the public extension system, but after the removal of government subsidies on inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers in the late 1980s, farmers had discontinued their use. As a result, coffee yields had fallen from around 800 kg/ha to as low as 184 kg/ha and producers were forced to search for alternatives.

The Union decided that it did not make sense to try to continue the development model used in "conventional" or "modern" coffee growing, based on the high use of external inputs, high yielding varieties and little or no shade. The members of the Union grow coffee on a very small scale, and are therefore interested not only in the profitability in terms of the ratio of costs to benefits, but also in factors such as a stable income and a balanced use of their labour throughout the year. These producers needed production methods in which little was bought from outside, the coffee was sold at the best possible price, and where it was possible to grow food crops for home consumption at the same time.



Agronomists from the Union began to train farmers in organic techniques to increase the quantity and quality of coffee production. In return, the farmers who had been trained were responsible for passing the knowledge on to other members of their group. Farmers started managing coffee trees with locally available resources instead of external inputs, focusing on shadow management, renewal of trees and the use of compost. Over time, this system evolved into organic agriculture and average yields gradually increased to the present level of just under 700 kg/ha. By adopting organic and agroecological management, the Union managed to improve their livelihood without depending on external inputs and without destroying their own resources.

Developing the coffee business

Coffee grown with environmentally friendly methods is of good quality and therefore highly marketable. The Union also found that it could contact and link up directly with the market. They started exporting coffee at the end of the 1980s and by the start of the 1990s, they were able to obtain organic certification from the *Organic Crop Improvement Association* (OCIA) and Naturland. In this process, the Union discovered that there were entire networks of consumers who wanted to use their purchasing power to support the work of the Union.

As part of the effort to further develop the coffee business, the Union started promoting the concept of coffee shops with its own brand name: Café La Selva. The coffee shops made it possible to market the coffee at more competitive prices and to generate more benefits for the members. The Union opened eleven shops in Mexico, the United States and Europe. In this process it found a strategic partner in *Vínculo y Desarrollo*, an organization created to foster business partnerships with social organizations based on trust, joint responsibility and professionalism. The outcome of this unique entrepreneurial partnership was the establishment of five more coffee shops. *Vínculo y Desarrollo* helps to market the coffee by promoting the brand and the cultural values associated with the indigenous communities that grow the coffee. Through *Vínculo y Desarrollo* approximately 50 small private investors have bought shares in the Union's Coffee shops, in this way establishing new mechanisms to strengthen social enterprise in Mexico.

The Union maintains and builds the relationship with the communities. Organic coffee is bought at a fair price and processed in a plant owned by the Union. This gives the Union control over the quality and value of the coffee. Two thirds of the coffee is exported as green, unroasted coffee to countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, England, United States and Canada. The remaining one third is roasted and sold through the chain of coffee shops with the help of *Vínculo y Desarrollo*. The guaranteed sale to this coffee chain gives growers a much-needed regular income. A small percentage of the profits go to the village associations of the member communities to reinvest in coffee production and community development activities such as health, education and infrastructure projects. For example, the Union has set up a women's training centre that runs reading classes and human rights training, and where women learn how to bake biscuits that are sold with the coffee.

At present there are 18 Café La Selva outlets in Mexico (Mexico City), Europe and the USA. Each of the coffee shops is financially self-sufficient and maintains high sales levels. It is planned to increase the number of coffee shops to 40 by 2008.

Unión de Ejidos de la Selva, together with *Vínculo y Desarrollo* have developed a unique marketing channel for the direct sale of organic coffee, allowing for the commercialization of a volume of approximately 3 tons per month, at the best possible price. Farmers now deal with the Union directly, so no intermediaries are needed and incomes are consequently higher. This has been of great value to the members of the Union, allowing them to receive direct payment for their coffee at good prices, during a time when the coffee prices have been at their lowest.

Conclusions

The experience of the Union has shown that it is necessary to develop and promote community-owned models that are socially accepted, that guarantee food availability, and that generate resources to invest in the improvement of the standard of living of the families and the community. Ecological agriculture is only possible if people shape it, if it offers tangible benefits, and if the benefits are equally shared.

The point of departure and the backbone of such a strategy is, without a doubt, the social organization and the linking of the community to social cooperation networks. The organic and agroecological management of the resources has enabled the further development of the communities without dependence on the external inputs which will ultimately destroy the resource base. A development like this is possible if communities manage to link up with the market, and are supported by consumers that are conscious of the repercussions of their purchasing power.

Despite their successes, coffee producers in Chiapas still face many challenges: creating employment for their young people; maintaining a direct and solid relationship with their consumers; improving the productivity in an ecological way; improving the quality of social services; and education of the members of the organization. ■

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