



Disasters and social participation in a Nahuat Community from Mexico

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Abstract

This article is organized in four sections. The first one introduces to the topics of disasters and community participation. The second section describes a participative paving project of a rural community as means of confronting a disaster in December, 1989. A snowstorm destroyed the region's coffee plantations dramatically affecting its population. An analysis of the relationships of vulnerability, resilience and community participation is presented. The third section is an account of community's social participation facing intense rains in October 1999 and the positive effects of the joint action of inhabitants from the community, teachers and university professionals. The fourth section presents the dramatic events caused by the Dean Hurricane in August-September 2007. This section stresses the importance of preventive actions derived to resilience and community participation.

Key words: Disasters, vulnerability, resilience, community organization and social participation.

Introduction: The disasters

The increasing frequency of destructive events.

Sustainable development, eco-development, sustainable society are some of the multiple and varied concepts that, especially in the seventies, started to be developed to face socio- environmental challenges. The report called *Club of Rome: The Limits to Growth* could be signaled as a symbolic date about the growing consciousness of something that had become evident from decades ago, the crescent deterioration of the human's habitat due to the actions taken by humans.

In this context, the topic of disasters and their study started to acquire a prominent place in the scientific

realm as well as in public policy, given the increase of the frequency of destructive events in diverse locations of the planet. Explanations of disasters have their own history: they went from religious interpretations that considered them to be "God's punishments", -a belief widely spread during ancient times as well as the Middle Ages- going to the Enlightenment interpretations of disasters that emphasizes an anthropogenic feature. It is now a common place the recognition that the so called "natural disasters" are actually a social product and the result of a human civilizing process which has been taking place during the past two centuries: industrialization, population growth, the "development" and happiness paradigm, all of them

Modernity's features in different versions, such as those of western capitalism and that of the socialist bloc.

The split society-nature started to take alarming proportions, and current informational capitalism, post-industrial and post-socialist, flexible, global and at the end savage, in the one we are immersed, has not been able to cope nature's destruction. The issue is not an easy one to face because it involves cultural constructions from long date. The hegemonic cultural trend has been and is still one that promotes lifestyles that imply a high degree of energy and water consumption, and at the same time, a great production of waste. These ways of life have already become unviable for the whole population and they are only possible for a minority of the people. Those who live in such lifestyles are not willing to change them, and those who have no access to them, desire to have it. In addition to that, the structural and symbolic frameworks that hold them in place and feed those unviable ways of life are not easy to revert, or at least their transformation includes great social costs in doing it.

The environmental summits, environmentalist organizations, the growing debate about global warming, air's pollution, and scarcity of water and, in general, what has been called climate change has allowed some actions to be taken by some governments and citizens. Even though the effects of their actions have had limited results, these are symbolically significant.

New phenomenon's conceptualization

From the decade of the eighties, as an answer to the increase in the frequency of the so called disasters, the conceptual frameworks started to grow rapidly through important analytic works (Dynes, R. R. 1993, Quaratelli, E.L. 2000, Maskery, A. 1989, Blaikie, 1996, Aguirre et al, 1995). This conceptualization includes multiple forms of categories of risk, threat, vulnerability and resilience or resistance capacity; and have been distinguished as calamity, disaster or catastrophe according to their intensity levels.

Among different conceptions of disaster, one that seems to be relevant is the one which regards it as a natural change, ordinary or extraordinary, that involves damages to human beings. If there is no damage done to human groups, it cannot be regarded, in strict sense, as a disaster.

Taking this definition as a starting point, it can be said that the disaster's magnitude –and in consequence the level of risk for the population

affected by it-is directly proportional to their vulnerability. The concept of socio-environmental risk has been identified as one of great analytic usefulness and diverse authors define it as the relationship between vulnerability and threat. Vulnerability is a population's fragility, the latter understood as a geographical location, insufficient material infrastructure, precarious housing, public institution's weaknesses, or social isolation. Threat, on the other hand, is a sudden change in the environment. The greater the vulnerability or fragility are, the greater the risk of damage in a given population and as well its difficulty to recover from it. That is why a population living in extreme poverty, located in areas where the impact of climate change is more direct and frequent, is a population in a situation of high risk.

Finally, from physics, it has been adopted the concept of resilience, understood as the capacity to resist before destruction and also the capacity to re-construct after a traumatic situation. It is a person's or group's capacity to adapt well in the face of tragedy, trauma and threat.

Indigenous communities and disasters.

Indigenous communities from Mesoamerica, as those from other parts of the world, live in a paradox. On the one hand, their way of living is precarious and they are subjugated to different types of oppression, discrimination and harassment which increase their vulnerability. On the other hand, they have accumulated an extremely important and relevant knowledge regarding their environmental surroundings, that, as it was said by the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon "the world is paying increasing attention to the leadership of indigenous populations in environmental matters" (ONU, 2007).

Traditional knowledge has been useful in different situations to diminish the impact of natural disasters. In a recent symposium held at Oxford University it was mentioned how indigenous populations "use mangrove swamp areas to absorb the strength of waves and tsunamis, and some others apply genetic diversity in farming to prevent total failure of certain crops.

Although, it is also evident that many indigenous communities currently have to adapt to new ways of life due to environmental changes. That is the case of Saami communities devoted to deer pasturage in Sweden who have to face the challenge to find food under a thick layer of ice due to the increase of snowstorms. The Andean communities are facing serious problems of food scarcity, which has resulted

from extreme climates (ONU, 2007).

Social Participation

We define social participation as availability of the members of a collectivity to interrupt their daily life to devote time to the production of public goods. Disasters, by definition, interrupt daily life, which does not automatically translates into social participation but, without a doubt, promote it. The greater or lesser habit of the affected groups to participate is one of the factors that diminishes or increases its vulnerability.

With regard to the response actions to face disasters, ways of participation are varied and in this work we will analyze events that took place in a community in the North-eastern Mountains of Puebla by three destructive events: a frost in 1989, heavy rains in 1999 and Hurricane Dean in 2007. A special emphasis will be given to the process that took place during the frost of 1989.

A Nahuat Community and a Non Governmental Organization

This work underlines the social participation process to face the consequences of the frost of 1989, and it also analyzes the impact of the relationship between the community and a NGO in the response actions to the disaster.

Twelve years of intercultural relations in the Northern mountains of Puebla (Sanchez, M.E., 1985) between an indigenous community and an urban team composed of The Nahuat community of San Miguel Tzinacapan and PRADE Group (PRADE stands for: Animation and Development Project Civil Association in Spanish) led to the constitution of three community approaches of self-development, ethno-development and eco-development. Twenty-two years later, in 2007, those approaches seem to be more modest as a consequence of the globalizing changes and environmental catastrophes. Instead of self-development, it should be talked about decent survival; instead of ethno-development, cultural coalition; and instead of eco-development, disasters prevention (Sanchez, M.E. & E. Almeida, 2005). 1989, the year when it snowed, was the starting date for these new utopian horizons. Survival, cultures' coalition and disasters prevention are tightly related to each other as it will be showed in the following parts of this work.

The snow storm of 1989 and the community paving project.

Social communitarian participation has been, in the

Nahuat community studied here, the central element of its survival, also crossed by its history of external and internal conflicts of diverse intensity (Sanchez, M.E. & E. Almeida; 2005). The types of participation blended new forms with traditional ones. It gave rise to the kind of the interaction between the peasants and the mestizo group of professionals who established in the community since 1973. Towards 1987 participation had been consolidated in four local organizations. The local organizations were: a Rural Production Society, a Society of Social Solidarity, a Cooperative for consumption and the NGO of people external to the community.

In December 1989, a snowstorm occurred in the Cuetzalan region, in the Northeastern Mountains of the state of Puebla, where is located the community studied in this work (Gutierrez, L. & Rodriguez, F.J.). A first version of the description of these events was presented in March of 1991, at the Conference of Participative Research organized by the Psychoanalysis Seminary A.C. (Almeida et al, 1991).

The economy from this zone depended basically on the coffee plantations that had been established since the end of the XIX Century, and it had become almost a single crop farming. Snow burned almost all coffee crops, leaving the zone -San Miguel Tzinacapan included- without their main means of living. Oddly, almost simultaneously, the international agreement that regulated world coffee prices was cut, making its price drop rapidly. The "natural" disaster and the transnational disaster took place at the same time.

In Puebla State, in the eighties, coffee was grown in 48 out of its 217 counties. Coffee production occupied nearly 50,000 hectares. Northern Mountains from Puebla had a production of around 1000.2 Kg. per hectare. In this zone 90% of producers were small owners and the rest of them were landowners who took up almost all the stock of the production of peasants. The latter instead of finding the economic support for their needs made richer and richer the caciques (chiefs) who controlled like a monopoly the commercialization of coffee.

Towards the end of the eighties, coffee occupied the second place in agricultural production in the State of Puebla and it was the most important cash crop for export in the country. Northern Mountains from the State produced 90% of the total production of the state of Puebla and it was the main income for its inhabitants. The Mexican Institution for Coffee (INMECAFE in Spanish) regulated market prices and acquired part of the production while at the same

time handled export permissions. Between INMECAFE and hoarders made peasants remain in a big economic dependency.

Looking for alternatives to migration

As a result of the frosts on December 23th and 24th, 1989 in the Northern Mountains of Puebla, the inhabitants' survival, particularly that of indigenous population, was in question and temporary migration became the main alternative for survival. It was urgent to create temporary employment so people from the town were able to have an income which could help them keeping their standard of living and at the same time creating a community improvement.

The elaboration of a paving project: participation in cascade.

In one of the meetings of the Health Center "Tapajtiloyan", in January of 1990, the possibility to look for alternatives for subsistence were discussed; not only for San Miguel community but for all neighboring towns. The Health Center coordinator (Blanca Rosas (+) PRADE, A.C. member) and a peasant (Luis Félix) from San Miguel –a member of the Health Committee who also belonged to the Research Center of PRADE A.C.- thought that a paving project for the community could be a temporary solution.

On January 7th, 1990 the idea was presented to the Research Center of PRADE, and two other members from this Center (Antonio Vázquez and Eduardo Almeida) started to collect information to design the project. First, existent potentialities were analyzed: both internal and external to the community and it was found that if it was possible to put them together to work, the project should become a reality. They were aware that the majority of the people from rural communities had knowledge and abilities but the lack of economic resources make it difficult to achieve their objectives. They were also aware of the fact that in order to provide the project with a formal structure they would have to take into account existing opportunities in San Miguel due to local independent organizations. These organization would be the platform to create the Committee Pro Paving, which would be in charge of managing financial resources; and to lead, advise and supervise the project. The participating organizations were: a) CEPEC a Society of Social Solidarity; b) The Tzinacapan section of the Regional Cooperative; c) The Animation and Development Project (PRADE); and the Rural Production Society from San Miguel.

The first groups to mobilize were the Health Center

and the PRADE Research Center. After them, the Cooperative store and CEPEC coordinated efforts and finally, the Society of Rural Production was integrated to the whole group (Almeida, 1999).

A first draft of the project was written, in which the main causes why it was being designed were described and its objectives established:

1. To face the crisis produced by the frost.
2. Create employment in the community to support its inhabitants, regardless their political affiliation.
3. Improve town's streets, as a community benefit.

The aims of the project were:

1. Create a Committee which held the project's legal representation. The task was not easy since it had to be agreed amidst political turmoil derived by the close elections for the County Auxiliary President from the jurisdiction.
2. Write a list of the needed tools for the project.
3. Convince the town inhabitants to donate the stones for the paving.
4. Determine the places to be paved.
5. Define the technique to conduct the paving. It implied to know how many stones would be needed, how to conduct the cobbled paving, the procedure to steam roll and how to locate the stones.

In order to do this whole process some consults were conducted with the inhabitants of the town who had the local knowledge. In March, the first draft of the project was presented to the Board of Representatives of the four Independent Organizations from San Miguel. The Board approved the project. At the same time, a contract was established with an anthropologist from the National Indigenous Institute (INI, Pedro Martínez), who suggested that the project should be presented to de State Delegation of the Ministry of Budgetary Management.

Local elections and national recognition: social effervescence and institutional support

At the same time that the project was being designed under a participatory approach, another two important processes were evolving in a parallel way. On the one hand, since the end of 1989 the four organizations under the leadership of the local cooperative, were conducting an intense political campaign in order to support their candidate for the local presidency. This process ended the 25th of

March having as a winner the organizations' candidate which would become a decisive factor in the implementation of the paving project.

On the other hand, "Nexos", a magazine of national circulation, published a call for proposals to apply for the Solidarity Grant 1989. One of the members of the NGO8 (Maria Eugenia Sanchez) wrote a Memory of Actions taken by PRADE, A.C. which was sent to be considered at the contest. On May the 15th the Board of Advisers from PRONASOL (National Solidarity Program) informed PRADE, A.C. that they had been awarded the 1989 recognition. This recognition included three million pesos cash from the time (around 300,000 current pesos), which were devoted to complete the payment of the land where the store of the local cooperative was established. The recognition was also a main factor in obtaining the resources granted by PRONASOL in order to implement the cobbled paving project.

The procedures: nightmare and lessons learned.

Towards the end of March, the final document of the project was submitted to the State delegation of the Ministry of Budgetary Management. The document was signed by the Secretary General of the group of the four independent organizations from San Miguel and the directors of each organization. From March to July the Pro-paving Committee conducted several negotiations which cannot be described here nor analyze, but which also were part of an important process of training, participation and coordination of the community with external institutions.

On May 29th was formally established the Committee before the Notary from Zacapoaxtla. The project finally obtained the approval on July 1st.

There was a waiting till October 19th when the local President could pick up in Puebla the first part of the deal: 66.580 million of pesos (66,580 current pesos).

The project's implementation: The community as an enthusiastic workplace

In October 1990, the inhabitants were anxiously awaiting for the starting of the works. 10 months had already passed from the date of the disaster.

Discussions about the project that would offer possibilities of employment, income and community improvement had been taking place for over six months. A popular assembly had already taken place to organize the work. Finally, Monday October 22th, 1990 they started working. By then, a big number of head of households had already migrated in search of employment and income.

An average of 200 peasants was dedicated to the cobbled paving of the streets of the village. The community became a workplace where enthusiasm was obvious.

Suddenly, on November 23rd, after the visit of some low-ranking government employees from Puebla, the works were suspended. The second delivery of resources was postponed until a financial audit would be conducted. The reality was there were no major irregularities, but it was a signal of bureaucratic and monopolizing jealousy, since the resources had been directly granted by the central government of Mexico to the community.

All organizations involved and the local presidency took action once again to face this challenge. They were successful in getting the remaining money. On 4th December, the issue was solved in favor of the community. The Ministry of Finance granted the remaining 266.320 million pesos (266.320). These resources were locally administered and financial reports were presented according to the advancement of works. It had been agreed that each worker would receive a payment of 100 pesos daily, a sum bigger than the minimum salary of that year (1989).

Works started again on December 5th, 1990 and they continued until September, 1991.

The community's cobbled paving was done at steady pace; people from San Miguel Tzinacapan and from nearby communities participated in the work regardless their political affiliation. All works were coordinated by the Committee and the local Presidency.

Each Saturday payments were done and an Assembly of all workers took place in order to analyze project's advancement. The Committee reoriented the work, pointed out deficiencies as well as good decisions. It was also a space where workers presented complaints and suggestions to the Committee. A strict control of resources was applied and all workers received the same payment. The monies were asked for employment and they were applied on it.

The relation among vulnerability, resilience and social participationThe structure of participationThe project's idea emerged from both an endogenous actor and an exogenous one in

order to face an evident need. From the beginning of the project, some community's organizations participated in the project's design. The political campaign was oriented to promote its viability. The traditional indigenous organization from the town –

religious assignments - supported the project too. The inhabitants' participation was first mediated by the organization representatives' action, and then it acquired a complete prominence in the implementation and the benefits obtained by communitarian work.

State bureaucratic action within the community was reduced to its minimum expression. There were clear minimum norms both in the organization and the work. It was possible to combat and defeat outsider bureaucratic intervention. The community provided workforce and the material resources and it was well aware that funds granted by PRONASOL were obtained due to its coordinated organization. The sense of co-responsibility was developed and fostered because no one could claim unilaterally the project's success: it was not due to a single organization, nor to the local presidency, nor to PRONASOL, neither to the State. The success was the whole community's success.

An authentic counterbalanced system facilitated the transparent management of resources. Local Presidency was permanently supervised by the Pro-Project Committee and this in turn was supervised by the former. In the same way, salaries' equality impeded the privileged allocation of funds for only some people. Weekly assemblies also contributed to the honest management of budget.

The memory of participation.

Ten years later, twenty-one members of the community who had taken part in the paving project were interviewed. Interviews were held between May 19th and 25th, 2000.

The memory of the process reported by the interviewees is similar with regard to the concrete actions. They all remember the places from where the stones were brought: Ahuach, Tepeitic and Tepetzalan; who donated them and which construction and carve workers participated too. Regarding the atmosphere lived during the process, interviewees in 2000 keep many memories about this intense community action. They remember that in it women and men worked hard and also that people from other communities joined them, people from Ayotzinapan, Xaltipan, Yohualichan, Tepetzintan, Pinahuistan, Cuetzalan, Acaxiloco, Txicuilan and Cuahutamazaco. They all emphasize that the success achieved was due to popular participation. The interviews results clearly demonstrate that in people's minds the paving was a great collective action, carried out by the people and their own authorities. Ten years after the disaster and the work done by the

people, they still remember those times in which people from the town and the region participated in a collective enterprise.

Answers are more dispersed and vary widely regarding to having more precise memories about how participation was organized, from where were obtained the funds, who had the initiative to present the project, etc. Only three interviewees directly mention that this project was aimed to face the impacts of the snowstorm.

Risk mitigated by social organization

The community of San Miguel Tzinacapan has a long history of resistance as many indigenous communities have; and this has allowed the village to survive and celebrate despite of its economic and geographic location and the structure of social subordination that has placed it in a high level of risk. The interaction of a group of external professionals who emigrated to San Miguel since 1973, let reinforce a collective self-esteem and trigger a new organization process. It allowed diversifying and reinforcing links with institutions from outside the community. It also helped diminishing in an important way, the town's vulnerability and therefore, the risk of the community. In this way, the disaster caused by the snow, could be faced in a creative way. Nevertheless, without the resilience of indigenous cultures that have faced deprivation and uncertainty for centuries, the level of participation achieved in the cobbled paving project, as well as the atmosphere lived during the process, could not be explained.

Confronting the intensive rains of 1999: indigenous people, teachers, and university actors.

3.1. An announced disaster: Torrential rains in September – October 1999

(Acevedo, B. 2002: 115-123)

During September and October 1999, exactly between September 29th and October 7th there was sequence of torrential rains in the mountains (Fernandez Fuentes, A. 1999: 7) which had a strong impact deforesting hills, as well as deteriorating poorly built and roads and houses and public buildings settled in risky locations. The region changed, flooding cut the system of communication, harvest was lost as well as properties and some human lives. Popular reaction to these terrible events exceeded by far actions taken by authorities (Acevedo, B. 2002). The area is vulnerable and as it has been demonstrated, storms have happened again in subsequent years. Preventive actions from

authorities have been very limited. Although, it has to be said that the population has been learning from these painful experiences and according to their limited resources they have been developing measures to prevent the consequences of possible disasters (Fritz, C. E. 1979; Toxqui Furlong, M.G. 2000).

3.2. San Miguel and Cuetzalan festivals and the water torrents.

During the autumn of 1999, the Patron Saints' festivals of San Miguel Tzinacapan and San Francisco Cuetzalan were being organized. In San Miguel Tzinacapan, the festival of September 29th was being awaited as usual, with happiness despite the tensions that had taken place in the previous months. The fear was also the same as usual: that it would rain that day and the procession of the Patron Saint and the dances would be affected. In fact, this happened; it rained heavily from September 28th till October 1st. During two days rain stopped and it was expected that on October 4th the festival of San Francisco in Cuetzalan could take place joyfully.

Unfortunately, on October 3rd at four o'clock in the afternoon started to rain again and it rained as it had never rained before in all the region, from that day till October 6th. The indigenous market from Cuetzalan was swept along by rain and the streets became rivers. Water came out from the hills as internal cascades exploding. Merchants, tourists, and the entire town were in shock. There were roads' landslides, and parts of some hills fell apart. The region was overflowed, coffee plantations were destroyed, water swept away animals, and many houses were seriously affected as well as some people died. Calls asking for help started to be transmitted through the region's indigenous radio station XECTZ. It was known through television that the disaster covered a big area from the states of Puebla and Veracruz. Fear was generalized.

3.3. Social dynamic and disaster's evolution.

Rapidly, help brigades were formed with voluntaries coordinated by the County's government manager. The municipal auditorium was habilitated as a refuge.

On October 5th, a brigade tried without success to help the Tozan Community, which is located in the margins of the river of the same name. Then a group from Tzinacapan coordinated by the local President managed to save the seventy adults and children from Tozan. They were accommodated in the Presidency office. In order to provide help to the inhabitants

from Xaltepec, the small buildings of the Takachualis Commission of Human Rights, and the Nursery of Tzinacapan became refuges too. Inexplicably, the President of Cuetzalan was absent during all those days. On October 7th and 8th rain stopped, the region was isolated. The roads from Cuetzalan to Zacapoaxtla, and from Ayotoxco to Teziutlan were closed. The bridge of Buena Vista, which was another way of access recently built, was also destroyed. Soon stores from Cuetzalan started to be

empty and hunger started to be felt. Groups of exhausted people started to arrive to San Miguel from faraway places as Putaxcat,

Plutonichuchut, from Huehuetla County. The afternoon of October 9th it rained again. Electric shocks damaged the energy plant from Mazatepec. There was a shortcut of energy. Telephones did not work. The radio XECZN stopped its transmissions. Federal and State governments took a long time before showing up in the places affected. There were no works to open the road from Zacapoaxtla to Cuetzalan as it had been previously announced.

3.4. Teachers get organized.

Given the standstill situation of authorities, some teachers - which had taken part in a Diploma on "Environmental Vulnerability" organized by PRADE A.C. and the Iberoamericana University from Puebla (Zambrano, 1993)- started to coordinate teachers from the region in order to take action. Monday October 11th teachers from all teaching levels got together in front of the municipal palace of Cuetzalan. They coordinated the population to open the road with picks and shovels and invited all communities to join them. The answer was surprising. Daily, around 1500 people worked with picks and shovels, stockpiled goods and prepared food for all workers. By the side of Ayotoxco people also worked to open the road. Civil organizations from Puebla, among them the Iberoamericana University managed to deliver provisions through Buena Vista.

Despite these actions, shortage of supplies kept growing as well as the immobility of authorities. *"Why is there a total absence of government from all its levels? Why not a single helicopter has come down here? Why whenever there is a guerrilla somewhere they can land even during the night?"* a teacher asked herself. On Wednesday 13th a march of protest to Puebla started to get organized in order to denounce government's negligence and indifference.

This was not necessary because on October 14th the President of the Republic and his “retinue” arrived by helicopter and they could see the inhabitants’ indignation and rage. A whole scenery had been tried to be organized to receive the President, putting pressure on women beneficiaries of the PROGRESA program to pretend the refuge was working properly; that military doctors were providing assistance to the population and giving free medicines. But when he and the governor of Puebla entered the County auditorium, there was not a single applause. Instead, people were shouting “road, road, road”. Both the President of Mexico and the governor of Puebla had to leave without being able to speak.

From October 15th the magic of rebellion, and the presidential visit made it possible to have many helicopters flights with supplies even amidst the rain. The teachers’ organization, especially due to the leadership of those who had been participating in the Diploma of Environmental Vulnerability organized by PRADE and UIA-Puebla, played a decisive role in organizing people’s participation, as well as in relevant actions to reestablish normal activities. The confrontation against the authorities make them take their responsibility in confronting the disaster.

IV. The Dean Hurricane and the Festival in 2007

Eighteen years after the frost, and eight after the flooding of 1999, the Dean Hurricane arrived to the Northern Mountains of Puebla with a strength that was unexpected. On August 22nd at the beginning of the afternoon chaos invaded Tzinacapan. The elderly people told it had never happened something similar to this. Trees were flying, rain was moving horizontally and roofs from many houses were taken away by the wind. The following day after the hurricane passed, it was necessary –although not without a bereavement ritual- to finish tearing down the immense age-old tree that guarded the main plaza. Pepper trees, one of the main current income resources of the population, were torn down by wind as if it was a crop being weed. The location that was used for the community’s band rehearsals, and where diverse courses took place, became a refuge for those who lost their homes. Incessant rain and later, the arrival of the Lorenzo hurricane kept causing several damages, leaving their print too.

Population’s organization and participation were diverse. The support consisted basically providing sheets of steel and cardboard for the reconstruction of roofs of affected houses. Bricks and some food supplies were also provided. This help had been sent

by Federal and State authorities, NGOs, universities, Rotaries and some others. The intermediaries to deliver the help in the case of Tzinacapan have been different organizations from the zone.

After the 1989 frost, that ruined the coffee plantations, the zone’s main economic resource, the anxiously asked question of the external professionals was: How was the population going to face the situation? Multiple activities had been conducted together by PRADE, A.C. and the inhabitants of the community since 1973, activities regarding economics, education, health, and organizational issues as well as building links with outside actors. What could be observed after the intensive rains was remarkable. It was remarkable the speed with which domestic groups reorganized to reinforce their productive actions: art crafts elaboration, children’s work as tourists’ guides, young women emigrating to work as domestic workers, young men forming music bands, men and women improving the care given to crops and pepper trees, and creative use of external support. The mental flexibility, the emotional determination, the ability to face uncertainty and deprivation- were all astonishing, as was their capacity to keep celebrating life. This happened once again after the Dean hurricane.

After the Dean hurricane, the festival of the town on September 29th took place with the joy and organization that characterizes it. It is true that there was a need to eliminate festival activities that were held other years, but in no way its essential features were absent. There were seventeen ritual dances: Negritos, Santiagos, Quetzales, Voladores, Moros, Tesoneros, Migueles⁹. There was also a procession through the whole town, basket ball championships, tacos, sweets and ice cream stands, pots and blankets merchants; and the local band played nonstop. Many people, women and men of all ages celebrated the festivities wearing embroidered blouses and skirts and sandals.

All over the place there were color and life, the religiosity that draws together fright and joy; promises and fears, the Talokan and San Miguelito.

Conclusions

The interaction process between the Tzinacapan community and PRADE A.C. started in

9 All these names refer to different groups of ritual dances. Translator’s note.

1973. It has gone through all sorts of transformations and vicissitudes. It has meant joint actions in

different realms as well as in processes of participative research and investigative participation. It has diminished the community's vulnerability and increased the ability to confront disasters, as it was shown by the ways in which the different events mentioned in this article have been faced. It also has favored dense levels of social participation. The formative processes of different kinds, the generated networks, the recovery of the oral tradition that served to strengthen the collective spirit, together with the to that inherent cultural capacity of the community to survive with dignity and to celebrate constitute an interesting complex approach in confronting disasters.

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