

## The Zapatistas and Global Civil Society: Renegotiating the Relationship

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Ten years have passed since that chilly dawn in January 1994, when the world awakened to find an indigenous rebellion underway in Chiapas, Mexico. The uprising immediately generated sympathy worldwide. Since those early days the engagement of national and international civil society has grown into one of the distinctive characteristics of the Zapatista movement, crucial to its survival and with great impact on the way it developed. The Zapatistas themselves soon understood the value of this connection and actively sought to cultivate and build on it.

The relation between the Zapatistas in Chiapas and their supporters worldwide has involved multiple challenges. Welcome as the support was, it was not without its problems. In response, the Zapatistas have undertaken efforts to restructure their relations with civil society and to establish greater control over the aid flowing to the indigenous communities. An important step was taken recently when the Zapatistas created new bodies, the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, through which all outside support is to be channelled and coordinated.

This article examines the evolution of relations between the Zapatistas of Chiapas and their outside supporters from a particular vantage point. The authors have been part of an experience of international *hermanamiento* between their universities and a Zapatista autonomous municipality. The account presented draws on the dialogue they have been engaged in over the past five years about how outside support could contribute to Zapatista development efforts.

### **Civil society and the Chiapas uprising**

The 1994 uprising met with overwhelming support worldwide. Dialog with civil society began immediately, and it is that larger constituency which, along with the international press and making clever use of the Internet, elevated the revolt in unprecedented ways from a regional conflict to a global issue. Civil society engagement with the Zapatista uprising took a variety of forms, moral, political and economic. When the Mexican government initiated a massive military campaign in Chiapas in the first days of 1994 (Oppenheimer 1996, 24), this caused public outrage in Mexico itself – where thousands marched the streets of Mexico City – as well as globally, pressing the government into a ceasefire. Such expressions of public support have recurred at crucial moments of the uprising, as in March 2001 when a hundred thousand sympathizers welcomed the Zapatistas to Mexico City where they had travelled to press for compliance with the San Andrés Accords on indigenous rights.

Civil observers have played an important role in containing military and paramilitary aggression directed toward the Zapatista civil population by organizing peace camps, accompanying threatened people and visiting communities. The

groundwork for such support was already in place in Chiapas where the 1982 Guatemalan refugee crisis had left a massive UN presence. International and national NGOs as well as Catholic followers of liberation theology were already involved in locations that eventually became Zapatista strongholds. With the rise of Zapatismo, the surveillance and reporting capabilities these organizations had developed allowed them to denounce the increasing militarization and violence in Chiapas, neutralizing the potential for widespread violent suppression.

As Chiapas became visible on the international screen, earning it the position of being the first 'virtual' rebellion, it attracted a wide range of international supporters, including activists from a reinvigorated left. Many worked from a distance sending a steady flow of educational and medical supplies, clothing and computers. Many others actually came to Chiapas, drawn by the international gatherings that the Zapatistas hosted, starting with the *Convención Nacional Democrática* that brought thousands of individuals from all over the world to the heart of the Lacandón jungle in the summer of 1994, and, two years later, the *Encuentro Intergaláctico* joining activists against neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup>

The Zapatistas soon recognized the global civil society as their most important ally, and this prompted them to shift their focus from armed struggle to social and political transformation. Problems also became quickly evident, however. One of the most pressing was that support for the Zapatista communities was not evenly distributed. Those closest to the accessible highland city of San Cristóbal, or to the Zapatista 'capitol' at La Realidad received more actual and moral support. Increasingly, those on the geographical margins of the movement sought ways to connect with the international community, to draw supporters to their villages, and take advantage of the potential for moral accompaniment and financial aid.

### **Linking with the Zapatistas**

In the winter of 1997-98, a UN funded NGO brought us into contact with two Zapatista communities in the jungle near the Guatemalan border. They were part of the Zapatista autonomous municipality *Tierra y Libertad*. Stretching from the Pacific border with Guatemala, along the entire frontier region almost to the Usamacinta River, *Tierra y Libertad* is the autonomous municipality with the largest geographical territory, including forty-four Zapatista support base communities. It was also one of the best developed, with autonomous educational, health and judicial systems operative in at least some parts. In 1997, the leadership approached members of five NGOs working with Guatemalan refugees in the frontier area to see if there might be some way that their communities could benefit from the huge sums of money flowing into the region. International focus and aid flowed especially into its *Aguascalientes*, which is the Zapatista regional centre of which they were part,<sup>2</sup> but *Tierra y Libertad* itself had only one functioning outside relationship.

In response to the appeal, one of the NGOs made efforts to seek out international contacts for *Tierra y Libertad*. Their efforts succeeded in garnering support from two American universities, and started a long term, multilayered international relationship linking the authors of this article with Zapatista communities. How this relationship developed provides an ethnographic window into the intricacies of outside support, and a look at what was taking place within the movement between March 2001 and January 2004.

Initially, the development of the relationship was complicated by the governmental campaign against autonomous municipalities. On 1 May 1998, this resulted in the violent destruction of the *municipio autónomo*, including the demolition of schools, clinics, administrative headquarters and the imprisonment of the autonomous authorities. This was coupled with an intensifying xenophobia in Chiapas, where international supporters were increasingly held responsible for the whole uprising. Contact with the outlying *municipios autónomos* became risky and over 300 supporters, including a large number of Italians and one of the authors, were expelled from Mexico between 1994 and 1999 (Global Exchange 1999). Nevertheless, students continued to raise awareness and resources for the Zapatista communities and a small development project in one community was planned and funded.

Conditions improved in July 2000, when the PRI suffered an historic defeat at the hands of Vicente Fox, and a coalition government was elected in the state of Chiapas. A number of military checkpoints were closed or moved and, as international visitors no longer faced extensive immigration and military interrogation, travel to the Zapatista communities became easier. This sense of relative peace created a space for reflection, evolution and change among the Zapatistas. At the close of 2000, in this new atmosphere of apparent calm, we made plans for a combined student group to travel to Chiapas to work directly with the two communities.

By July 2001, we prepared to bring the students to help build an autonomous school. At this time, the leadership of Tierra y Libertad, some of whom had been imprisoned for 18 months but were now released, expressed a concern with formalizing the relations between our universities and the autonomous municipality. In the confusion following the break-up of the autonomous municipality, our relationship with two individual communities continued and we worked on projects there. Until then, however, the relationship had not been formalized through the *Enlace Civil* in San Cristóbal, which since the beginning of the uprising had coordinated most international bodies in Zapatista communities and (until very recently) served as the public face of the autonomous municipalities.<sup>3</sup> The leaders of Tierra y Libertad now insisted we follow the general Zapatista rules for international relations and asked that we work out the details of an *hermanamiento*. This proposed sister-city relationship would be with the *entire* autonomous municipality of Tierra y Libertad, not just with the communities as we had begun.

### **A dialogue on development**

With our students on site during 2001, a dialogue began between ourselves and the authorities of Tierra y Libertad (the *consejo autónomo*) over some of the major problems the Zapatista organization had encountered in dealing with international aid. One of the chief concerns of the Zapatista leadership, as explained by their spokesperson, was that international NGOs and others use their contacts with communities to raise funds that do not get to the community in the end, in essence exploit the rebels to run an organization and pay outsiders. ‘We need to monitor resources that don’t get to the people who need them, but are resources which are raised in their name. We need to know who is doing what, and where’, he told us. We from our part understood that for the autonomous municipality this was a form of foreign policy. Another point raised concerned the distribution of aid. ‘We also want to make certain that the truly remote communities are not neglected’. This

sounded familiar from our own work in community development in which favouritism and divisionism was seen as 'bad development'. For the autonomous municipality, it was also a form of domestic and fiscal policy.

There was also the issue of operational costs. 'The communities are not completely free to accept money and service from you. Some of these resources must flow to the organization as a whole', the *consejo* spokesman told us. They explained that in the Zapatista effort to gain freedom and autonomy from the control of official government agencies, the communities were asked to give up some individual autonomy and some actual resources. As 'donors' we had no problem with this idea and we made a further suggestion: 'Have you thought about taking a portion, say ten percent, of all donated monies to use in a municipal development discretionary fund?' This seemed interesting to the *consejo*. 'So you think that if a hundred pencils arrive in a community, we should take ten for the municipio? How would you administer such a thing? A development tax?'

We thus found ourselves inserted in an ongoing process of dialogue and reflection among the Zapatista support communities, and between them and their autonomous municipal representatives and the larger organization. As the struggle for legal recognition of indigenous autonomy had ended in deception in April 2001, outward communication stopped but internally, the people continued a serious discussion. During 2002, work moved along steadily, particularly among the representatives of Tierra y Libertad and three other nearby autonomous municipalities (sharing the regional Aguascalientes at La Realidad). One subject of intense discussion was the desire for more control over relationships with those from the outside and the projects they offered; the other was the development of a mechanism by which all of the Zapatistas could share resources and information.

This less conflictive time afforded space to develop but it also brought the challenge of generating continued enthusiasm for the movement. During the long months without official communiqués, international attention seemed to wane. The international community was used to having flashpoints to rally around. Acteal and other instances of paramilitary violence were a powerful symbol of what was wrong with Mexico, and visible Zapatismo was an equally powerful response. But as the Zapatistas embarked on the refinement of their efforts at autonomous self-development without as overt a yoke of repression, there was less active support.

To regain some visibility, on 1 January 2003, the Zapatistas broke silence and marched to San Cristóbal to retake the town. It was an appropriate statement for the start of what would be a year of changes, a reiteration and re-enactment of their pivotal politico-military act of exactly nine years earlier, and a ritualized restatement of it. The occasion also served for the Zapatistas to reconfirm their commitment to the international community, speaking about critical issues: *No al terrorismo de Bush y Bin Laden*, and remembering past support: *Long live the disobedient Italians*.

### **Renegotiating outside support**

In July 2003, the Zapatistas announced sweeping changes in their external and fiscal policy as part of a broader reorganization.<sup>4</sup> The Aguascalientes were replaced with *Caracoles*,<sup>5</sup> and regional 'consulates' called *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (JBG) were opened. The Caracoles are set up as the regional seats of Zapatista civil government, sites of the infrastructure for large gatherings, including training pro-

grams and international encounters. The Juntas are to do the work of setting policy for everything from development to internal peace keeping. The new policies address the concerns about uneven distribution of aid and are an attempt to restructure relations with civil society. As spokesperson for the autonomous councils, Marcos wrote a lengthy critique of the provision of aid in a number of communiqués published in the national press, noting that:

...piling up in the *Aguascalientes* are non-functioning computers, expired medicines, clothing too extravagant that not only can we not wear it, we can't use it in our theatrical productions, and...single rose-colored shoes without their mates...And this kind of thing keeps coming, as if to say to us, 'poor folks, in such need, surely they will take anything, and this stuff is just in my way'...

Not only this. In addition, there is a kind of handout of even more concern. This is the approach of NGOs and international organizations that determines...that they decide what the communities need, without a thought towards consulting; imposing not just predetermined projects, but also the timeframe and form that they should take...The Zapatista communities are the responsible parties in their projects ... they make them go, make them produce and in this way make improvements for the collectivity, not just for individuals...From this moment onward the communities will not receive leftovers nor permit the imposition of projects.<sup>6</sup>

The quotation clearly reflects resentment on the side of the Zapatistas over the terms of aid and the fact that they are not being consulted on their needs. Subsequent texts address the problem of inequitable distribution of aid leading to envy and competition and eroding the morale and confidence in the movement among the civil bases. The Zapatistas made clear they seek a conversation about aid and needs and priorities in an attempt to make development more even and effective. With the creation of the Caracoles and JBGs they hope to gain a greater degree of control over development efforts. This assertion of agency seems fitting of a movement in search of more control over its entire trajectory.

### **Working with the new guidelines**

In early December 2003, we travelled again to La Realidad to reconfirm our relationship with the Zapatistas as representatives of an international entity. This time we were dealing with the JBG *Hacia la Esperanza*, located in the Caracol Madre del Mar de Nuestros Sueños<sup>7</sup> of which the autonomous municipality of Tierra y Libertad was a part. We found that the ten per cent development tax was now a reality, and we were eager to continue the dialogue under the new guidelines established in July.

We were bringing to the table of consultation the issue of commercialization, and the subject of *remanente* or profit. In our *hermanamiento*, we were developing outlets for Zapatista products. We had had one successful pilot project. The question facing us was: If all is to be distributed equitably throughout not just the *municipio autónomo*, but the entire Caracol, what would the community get back, after the initial ten per cent tax? 'We will need to start from the bottom', the *Junta* spokesperson told us. 'The producers must be consulted; this must be something to which the producers agree. There is no policy now since the situations have not yet

arisen. It is something that must be taken to the communities'. They would bring this issue to the *compañeros*, in a consultation process estimated to take two months. During this lengthy process of consensus decision-making, each community would be called to consider the proposals. A policy would emerge, we were assured. This important issue was on the table, and the slow gears of community consideration would soon begin to turn, bringing finished policy to the international supporters.

A second issue placed before the *Junta* was one of determining for us, as an international annex, what their greatest needs were. They answered the call to do a textbook-model, rapid needs assessment, returning two hours later with a one page proposal describing the pressing concerns in the area of education. Their primary and most pressing need was summarized in one compact paragraph and labelled in bold face capitals, EDUCATIONAL NECESSITIES OF THE COUNCIL OF GOOD GOVERNMENT. Immediately after the New Year courses would begin to train four classes of educational facilitators (*promotores de educación*) – 115 teachers, impacting 2031 students. Their first priority was support for teacher training. It was a substantial request for them, but we had immediate visions of how international aid could make an impact. Here was an effort that could reach into the far corners of Tierra y Libertad and three other Zapatista municipalities.

We were not the only petitioners in La Realidad on that misty December morning, as international and national supporters began to follow the emerging consultation process. A French woman wanted to do a follow up video study of children and education in San Juan del Rio. Two students from Mexico City working in Tepeyac were trying to get people to raise chickens to fund education in that rebel *ejido*. Like us, they had made the journey here in search of the *visto bueno*, the positive nod for an outside project. Long months of work with the community provided them with a sense of local and regional need, but it was still *their* vision inspiring the project, not a dialogical process of needs assessment. In the wake of the July communiqués concerning the imposition of projects, we wondered how they would fare.

### **An encounter full of challenges**

The relationship between the Zapatistas of Chiapas and members of global civil society has challenged and transformed both sides. The Zapatistas were challenged to rethink their central strategy and to critically examine their own culture and internal organization, making changes in terms of the roles of women and youth, and the use of alcohol, for example. On their side, they challenged the global supporters to rethink the terms and organization of assistance.

The new guidelines for outside support are demanding considerable changes from civil society supporters. As the Zapatistas encourage prospective partners to 'disencumber' their generosity, to donate in accordance with Zapatista priorities and coordinate their efforts within a bigger plan, they are asking them to give up control. Furthermore, they are asking civil society to 'accompany' them, which means they must respect the lengthy process of decision making among the Zapatista communities and be prepared to proceed at the same deliberate and reflexive pace.<sup>8</sup> The coming years will show how global civil society takes up this challenge.

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## Notes

1. See Ross 2000 for descriptive commentary.
2. The Zapatistas had five such centres. The name refers to a legendary place from the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917.
3. It is expected that the Enlace Civil will ultimately cease to exist as the JBGs take over their role. At the start of 2004, the Enlace Civil was downsizing its offices.
4. See van der Haar in this publication.
5. Caracoles are huge snail shells, an ancient Maya symbol of time, continuity and true speech, la palabra, the word.
6. Translated by the authors, this is part of a longer critique that appeared in *La Jornada* on 25 July 2003: 'Chiapas: la treceava estela (segunda parte), un muerto', pp. 4-6.
7. JBG Towards Hope; Mother Caracol of the Sea of Our Dreams.
8. For an elaboration of these ideas see Earle and Simonelli 2000; Simonelli and Earle 2003a, b.

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