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## **Collective Action, Gender Dynamics and the Constraints for Scaling Up Women Initiatives in Rural Mexico**

*The Case of “El Color de la Tierra”, An Indigenous Collective Initiative in Western Mexico*

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# ***Collective Action, Gender Dynamics and the Constraints for Scaling Up Women Initiatives in Rural Mexico: the Case of "El Color de la Tierra" an Indigenous collective Initiative in Western Mexico***

## **Abstract**

This paper undertakes an analysis of the tension indigenous rural women face as a result of partaking in collective actions and the rewards they gain from it. Through the reconstruction of an indigenous women-based collective action approach operating in indigenous community in western Mexico, the qualitative study intends to discuss the potentials and limits of SSE to expand and generate greater impact. The paper argues that the expansion potential of a collective action primarily depends on its own members and on the external actors. The paper concludes that as long as the rewards obtained through the organization are perceived as worthy enough to cope with the tensions it involves, their members will act as key factors for the survival and expansion of the collective action. Moreover, the conclusion is that the external actors might both, limit (by acting dishonest) or encourage (by generating rewards) the organization's expansion potential.



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# ***Collective Action, Gender Dynamics and the Constraints for Scaling Up Women Initiatives in Rural Mexico: the Case of "El Color de la Tierra" an Indigenous collective Initiative in Western Mexico***

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## **Introduction**

Collective action often organized through the building of cooperatives is one of the most common types of social resistance and solidarity in rural Mexico. Peasants use these approaches as tactics for gaining access to basic services (capital, extension, fair markets health and education) (Hellin, Lundy, & Meijer, 2009). Collective action can provide a more inclusive path to development, build resilience and has the capacity to link peasants with institutions and markets, and, often, grant them access to other levels among society, e.g. by promoting social mobility. Local collective actions, under the lens of the Social Solidarity Economic (SSE) are an alternative to cope with the problems peasants in rural areas (excluded actors) are facing. The main feature of such initiatives is their no-capitalist objective, but the aim of communal wealth of the members and the society. They are based on democratic decision-making process (one member one vote), and a vision of surplus reinvestment for their further expansion, or the creation and expansion of initiatives that share their social goals (Coraggio, 2011)

Similar to many other Latin American countries, Mexico's macro-economic policies have shifted towards free trade and industrialization of the agricultural sector. This orientation has been favouring agro-business over small producers, who are increasingly forced towards peri-urban areas and emigration (Barquera, Rivera-Dommarco, & Gasca-García, 2001). Large stretches of, the Mexican countryside suffers from extreme poverty, marginalization, food insecurity and natural resource degradation (Toledo, Alarcón-Chaires, & Barón, 2002) (King, Adler, & Grieves, 2012).

Consequently, the Mexican countryside is facing a feminization process. Due to the male-dominated migration (to the USA and cities) (Bacon 2008 pp. 51) and the entry of men to higher paying jobs (remaining in the same place), women in rural areas have taken the tasks of food production and resources management (Perea, 2012). The aforementioned situation, coupled with gender inequalities, and discrimination of women demands prompt solutions targeting rural women. The social aspects of collective initiatives have been seen as particularly important for women enhancing solidarity, and women's ability to overcome different forms of gender exploitation, as well as, productive constraints faced by small producers (Agarwal 2010 and 2011) (Mayoux, 1995). Moreover, Agarwal 2011, argues that reducing the inequalities and discrimination rural women face will increase the agricultural production potentials, and hence the overall food availability in countries, regions, and globally. Moreover, by increasing the women's bargaining power future generation's well being will also be improved (Agarwal 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on empirical data from the first field trip done by Carolina Contreras Arias, PhD student at the University of St. Gallen. The results here presented are part of her research project. For any questions, please contact at carolina.contreras@unisg.ch

Through the study of a women-collective action both topics can be analysed; the asymmetrical gender relations that negatively impact the sustainable development of rural areas, and the constraints small producers face as a result of the capitalist economic orientation in place. Likewise, conclusions about how consistent or contradictory the collective action is, in the sense of inclusiveness, gender equity, empowerment and sustainability with SSE.

For the purpose of this paper, I examined a cooperative-like organization from a rural region of western Mexico (Cuzalapa, Jalisco). The aim is to reconstruct this initiative of collective action in order to find out how it contributes to the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) discussion. By examining the tensions rural Mexican women face as a result of partaking in collective action and engaging in efforts for participatory change, I intend to question the limits of SSE, examining why they are so frequently unable to generate greater impact. I further expect to contribute to the discourse on how SSE contributes to sustainable development in the rural communities.

## Methods

The study was carried out in Cuzalapa, an indigenous community located in Western Mexico. The research subject was a cooperative-like organization called “*Organización Color de la Tierra*”. Altogether, the organization is comprised of 15 associated women. The research, was done through the use of participant observations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010), semi-structured interviews, open interviews, and focus groups adapted from (Pretty, 1995). The semi-structured questionnaires as well as the guiding questions for the open interviews were designed based on the Livelihood Approach framework for analysis developed by the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Advisory Committee of the Department of International Development (DFID) (Scoones, 1998) (Krishna, 2009)

In a fieldwork of eight weeks, I spent at least three days at each member’s home. During the three days, observations about: the gender division of labour, power relations, household dynamics, and infrastructure were done. In addition, the women were interviewed; they answered a semi-structured and an open interview. Additionally, 13 participatory observations during events (see page 4) were done and 14 external actors<sup>2</sup> were interviewed. Field notes on informal talks and spontaneous events were taken, and all interviews were recorded, the majority of the events were video taped, and observations were registered with notes. Some informal talks were also recorded.

Results obtained from this study should not be generalized as a shared reality. They deeply explain the situation and the reality of the organization and its members in stake. Yet, through the examination and reconstruction of this local experience, further discussion about the potentials and limits of SSE expansion are made possible.

## “Organización Color de la Tierra”

The initiative operates in a marginalized indigenous community; Cuzalapa, Jalisco, Mexico. This region is one of the eight poorest regions of the state (CENEVAL 2010). The main economic activity is subsistence agriculture. The organization started as a grassroot-women initiative intended to endure the situation of poorness and

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<sup>2</sup> External actors are any actors that do not belong to the organization and/or the community, but there are involved on its development. For example, clients, suppliers, trainers, or representatives of any institution (non-governmental and Governmental Organizations (NGO’s GO’s)).

marginalization that characterized the region. Based on indigenous traditions of shared responsibility, mutual obligation and communal stewardship<sup>3</sup>, the women started a group eleven years ago. It began as an embroidery group, organized by Rosa (the group leader), she started by showing girls (between 8 and 12 years) to embroidery and to market their products in the community. As time passes, students from the University of Guadalajara (UDG), who were doing research in the region, started to demand their products, and, as the demand increased, the girls' moms joined to group to help them with the production. At the end, the girls left, and the women stayed in the group and started to produce other things for sale. Coffee was a traditional crop from the region, but due to the international prices decreases its production stopped, nevertheless the women decided to try to produce and sell coffee again. With support from the UDG they started by commercializing it in the near tourist regions. As the coffee demand increased the women, needed to improve their infrastructure (machinery and facilities), and so they applied for some governmental projects. Due to several projects, they got the machinery and support for the facilities purchase and construction where they are actually operating. They base their agricultural production on traditional knowledge, cultural practices and organic principles of food production in agriculture, making use of local resources. The main activity is the production, transformation and commercialization of local products as well as ecotourism.

The paper is organized as follows: I first, intent to describe the tensions rural Mexican women, from the studied area, face as a result of partaking in a collective organized action. Then, I present the rewards women consider they gain from the organization. Afterwards, I try to explain how women take decisions on being or not active within the organizational activities, and, at the end, the discussions, and conclusions are presented.

## **Tensions that rural Mexican women face as a result of partaking in collective actions**

Women, who form part of a collective action, face tensions with different groups of society. These tensions influence their daily life and activities, but also have an impact on their personal development, and the development of their enterprises. In the community, tensions mainly arise when the women do not comply with what it is considered to be the "proper role". I divided the tensions into three kinds: first the intra-familiar tensions, second, the intra-organizational tensions, and third, tensions with external actors.

### *The "women's proper role" in the community of Cuзалapa*

In this section I divided the actives women developed in accordance to the three roles proposed by Caroline O.N. Moser on her paper "Gender planning in the Third World" (Moser, 1989, p. 1801); reproductive, productive and community managing work. In the community it is assumed that women's primary responsibility is to the home and children. They are responsible for the childbearing and rearing (reproductive work). Typical female home-activities include: making *tortillas*, cleaning the house, food preparation, washing and ironing the clothes and pets care. Typical male home-activities include: making the fire, fix broken things, carry heavy stuff, building house rooms and

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<sup>3</sup> The SSE common operating principles; participation, solidarity and innovation, voluntary involvement and autonomy, and the collective dimension are very similar to the Mexican indigenous organizing principles within the communities. See for example: "*Usos y Costumbres*" (Adler, 2012). Therefore, in many cases, the informal organization of collective initiative is quite common, and understandable for indigenous communities, and works as the SS describes it should (Fonteneau et al., 2011, pp. 27–28).

driving (if they have a car). Moreover, the women are responsible of all activities that concern the familiar well being (health, education, and nutrition); caring of the sick (children and older people) and assisting to school or to governmental subsidies meetings. Aside from the household responsibilities women play a secondary role in the agricultural activities. First, they take care of their own garden plantations of fruits vegetables and medical plants, and in some cases chicken and pigs. And, second, they help their partner in the harvest, irrigation, land preparation, and any other activity supervised by the male.

In contrast, men in the community basically work their own lands, and sometimes they get jobs as laborers in the construction, in the mining or in the agribusiness sector.

Concerning social and community activities (community management work); women are more likely to participate if the communal activity concerns education, nutrition or health and mainly as volunteers. For example, all the women interviewed were four times a month responsible for preparing the pupils breakfast and once a week for cleaning the school. In contrast, men are more likely to participate in political movements in the region, where they receive money and/or social recognition.

Apart from all the "invisible"<sup>4</sup> activities and home duties, the women from the organization are expected to comply with their job activities (productive work). For example;

- A one working day per week at the cooperative (from 10:00 to 18:00), during this day two women have to clean the establishment, attend the shops (the organization's shop and the grocery shop), and if required, give explanatory tours to the clients. They should also keep a daily sales and inventory control register in both shops. In addition, they are responsible of drying, cleaning, peeling, milling, and roasting the coffee and/or the *mojote*<sup>5</sup> whatever activity is required for that day. Also, they are responsible for producing, packing and labeling, all other products. This includes: the *mojote pipian*<sup>6</sup>, *pinole*<sup>7</sup>, and the coffee, that the cooperative produces itself, as well as the products that they merely distribute such as Roselle flower<sup>8</sup> and honey<sup>9</sup>. In addition to their one-day per week obligation, the women must meet other duties with certain regularity which include the following:
- Hosting tourist/non-tourist groups: Seven or more women (depending on the visiting group size) have to prepare the meal for the group (according to the food supply the currently have access to). They also have to prepare individual and group goods for sale. When the group arrives, it is received with coffee and cake, and then taken to the production facilities and to the organic coffee

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<sup>4</sup> The "invisible" activities according to Caroline O.N. Moser are the not remunerated, and not socially recognized activities that women perform, see Caroline O.N. Moser (Moser, 1989, pp. 1801).

<sup>5</sup> Mojote (*Brosimum alicastrum*): Tree of the genus *Brosimum*, family of *Moraceae*, division of angiosperms, including in the *Ficus* genus and mulberry trees. It is endemic to Mesoamerica: from Mexico to Peru. The fruit is a 2-3 cm sweet eatable drupe with one to three seeds are roasted and milled to produce flour or a coffee kind drink. They are rich in tryptophan. The crust, the leaves, the fruit and the seeds were and are used in the traditional medicine and religious rituals in Mexico. Mojote is considered to be endangered specie.

<sup>6</sup> Pipian: Traditional spice sauce or stew in Mexico. Basically made of pumpkin seeds and maize.

<sup>7</sup> Pinole: Traditional sweet in Mexico. Basically made of milled maize, sugar and cinnamon.

<sup>8</sup> Roselle flower (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), is a species of hibiscus native to the old world tropics used for the production of tee and as an infusion. In Mexico, the flower is dried and, more commonly, used as a beverage. It is also used for jams and national sweets.

<sup>9</sup> Distributing products are in this case, products that are not directly produced nor transformed by the members of the group. They are bought in grater amounts to other producers of the region, and sold with the organization's label.

plantations. A presentation about the organization follows. The visit ends with a meal. The tour takes in average 4 hours.

- Monthly meetings: Every 15<sup>th</sup> of the month the women meet to discuss: the monthly financial situation, problems within the organization, future modifications in any sense (product prices, purchase of material), and future activities (trainings, conferences, meetings etc.). Moreover, at the meeting, the distribution on the monthly gain takes place as well as the decision on the amount left for the organization's saving fond is taken.
- Participation in workshops, trainings and courses, in and outside the region: Sometimes, the women present their products and/or their organization in conferences or congresses. Some other times, they give workshops about the usages of the *mojote*. Frequently, the women are invited to participate in workshops on a variety of subjects, which can range from the use of organic compost to the production of jam, to marketing and financial matters. As these trainings might or might not take place at their facilities, the women are sometimes, request to travel.
- Sales outside the region: Once or twice a month, women sell their products at the University Center of the South Cost (CUCSUR) from the UDG in Autlán, Jalisco.
- Spontaneous meetings: are called when it is needed to discuss immediate decisions or solutions for unexpected circumstances. For example, pests' problems (in the nearest regions of the coffee plantation), unexpected sickness of any member, events coming up soon and so on.
- Individual production of trademark sale products: Apart from the products of the cooperative, the women also make certain goods at their home. The production of these goods will depend on the women's personal skills, and the inputs they have access to. These products include: seasonal-fruit jams, tostadas, embroidered clothes and napkins, Roselle sweets, eggs, fried plantains, sweet and salty popcorn, maize cookies, fruits and vegetables.
- *Tianguis Orgánico*<sup>10</sup>: About once a month, the women participate in a *tianguis organico*. Organic producers<sup>11</sup> from the nearest regions get together to commercialize their products. At the end, producers engage in barter (*trueque*). The main intentions are to diversify their own diets, to share knowledge (on products preparation, medical usages etc.), to save money, and to maintain the *trueque* tradition.

Table 1. Enlists the activities women are expected to perform within the organization, and it shows, which of the activities break the local traditional women's role and which not.

**Table 1.** Activities expected to be performed by the women of the "OCT"

Activity	Breaks the traditional woman role	Comment
<b>Trainings</b>	<b>++</b>	
Stitching/Embroidery	<b>o</b>	
Pottery	<b>o</b>	
Cakes\cookies	<b>o</b>	

<sup>10</sup> The *Tianguis Organico*, is an informal market where producers, that based their production on organic principles, meet for goods sells and exchanges.

<sup>11</sup> Organic producers are here understood as producers that base their production on organic principles and traditional knowledge. But they are not necessarily certified.



Medical tinctures	o	
Finances\administration	+	
<b>Technology owned by the woman</b>	++	
Coffee roaster	++	associated with food production
Coffee grinder	++	associated with food production
Cappuccino machine	o	associated with food preparing
Oven	o	associated with food preparing
<b>Travelling</b>	++	
Conduct training about cooking	+	
Present the cooperative	++	
Receive training	+	
<b>Ecotourism</b>	++	
Cooking for tourists/serving	o	
Guiding tours	+	
Selling products	o	
<b>*External actors contact (EA)</b>	+	* The contact to the external actor is even less associated with the traditional woman's role when he/they are male(s).
Politicians/authorities	+	
Universities	+	
NGOs	+	
EA that are female	+	
EA that are male	++	
<b>Land owned by the woman</b>	++	
++ = strong, + = slight, o = naught		

All these activities mainly require; time, specific skills and some involve travel. In the women's word, these requirements can be translated into "leave the family and the household responsibilities behind". In this region, this automatically means intra-familiar tensions; problems with the partner and, in many cases, problems with their sons and/or the family in law.

### *Intra-familiar tensions*

Within the community, intra-familiar tensions are basically caused when a woman in the eyes of the partner, the family members or the society, does not comply with what is considered to be here the "proper role". For the purpose of this paper, intra-familiar tensions refer to any act of male dominance that affects the women's freedom of decision. They can be expressed through the direct prohibition of partaking in a collective action, and/or to certain events and/or to travel. It can also be express through manipulation based on guilt discourses<sup>12</sup> and some times violence.

Ideological norms regarding the "proper" sexual division of labour often impede women from joining any kind of collective action. Even if they are allowed to become member of an organization, their activities must not interfere with their responsibilities as wives and mothers. It is assumed that women's primary responsibility is to the home and children and that any aside activity will hinder the accomplishment of their duties. For the women of the organization, working one day long, or assisting to a conference or training that involve external actors, frequently generates intra-familiar conflicts. The situation gets worse, if during a short period of time many activities are organized, or if travelling is required.

<sup>12</sup> Conversations between man and wife, which could be scornful or even in a peaceful manner, which outcome is to express how disappointed the male counterpart is and convince her (or at least try to) that her role is not fulfilled, the expectations, needs and his and his children's demands are unmet, thus she should feel guilty about it. (See Salinas Meruane, 2007)

Moreover, the fact that women contribute to the household income can also be read as male inability to sustain the family. As a result, men might see their masculinity put in question, not only within the family but also among the community members. Within the community and family, whispers about the “men’s incapacity to control their women”, “women abandoning their responsibilities as mothers and wives”, “women’s inappropriate behaviour, because of having a relation with external actors (clients, tourist etc.) and so on, create the kind of gossip that generates intra-familiar tensions. In this milieu the worst thing that can happen to a women, in terms of reputation and acceptance within the community is separation or divorce.

Some of the women, who started in the organization ten years ago, initiated without the permission of their partners. In many cases, such situation resulted into violence and intra-familiar problems. Some of the women endured the conflicts and are until now part of the cooperative. But, many others found no other alternative but to leave the organization. The case of IWNS<sup>13</sup> is one of the many cases that exemplify such situation.

*(IWNS min. 15:24) “What I disliked about the cooperative was that my sisters in law started to put ideas a Ramon’s (my husband) head. For example, they told him that I was never at home, that I was making him look bad in the eyes of the community, and things like that. So he told me, - if it is like that you are not going anymore to the cooperative – For example, they also told him that if I was out, it was because my lover came to see me, and so on. Such things were what they were saying. So he got mad, and told me that I must quit the group. And so that is why I left it.*

In the case of IWNS, abandoning the organization was the solution she found to her intra-familiar tensions. For the other 15 women that remain in the organization, usual strategies for intra-familiar tension avoidance include; missing the events, not traveling, and not complying with the organization duties (see table 1).

### *Organizational tensions*

Organizational tensions refer to conflicts among the members of the organization. These tensions are often caused, due to the member’s failures and unfulfillment of their obligations. They are frequently express through disagreements, discussions, grudges, revenges, and, less frequent, physical violence. As a result, the organization’s development is directly affected.

Within the cooperative, it is very common that the women fail to open the shops punctually, or that they leave the organization alone for long periods of time. It is also common that the women miss pre-organized events or travels. It was observed that, in average, only 3 out of 7 working days were completed without any absence<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, in average one third of the women did not assist to pre-organized events<sup>15</sup>. Usual reasons for their absences were; non permission from the partner to assist that

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<sup>13</sup> IWNS (Interwie Narsisa)

<sup>14</sup> For this, case an absence was considered when a woman did not assist at all, or when she left their responsibility for a period longer than two hours.

<sup>15</sup> In total seven pre-organized events with external actors including; trainings/workshops, marketing/publicity, and travel, were observed. These events do not take into consideration visit from clients (guided tours), nor internal monthly and spontaneous meetings. Only events where all the women were invited to participate were taken into consideration.

day, an school or medical appointment, meeting with the people from PROGRESA<sup>16</sup>, some agricultural activities and/or the necessity to stay at home because of household responsibilities. Considering that the women are required to go only one day per week to the organization, the missing incidence is quite high. It shows the strong male dominance over the women time-decision capacity. It further shows that any activity concerning the household has priority over the organization's events. In other words, the high failure rate demonstrates, how the women prefer organizational tensions and avoid as much as they can intra-familiar tensions.

The perception of a well or badly performed job in the organization might generate internal conflicts between the members. If one of the members has the feeling that her performance is better than the others performance, i.e.: travels more, miss fewer events, is more punctual, etc., she might generate a conflict. The conflicts mostly start by whispering behind each other's back, gossip about how unfair is it that the one member performs badly and others do their job in compliance with what it is expected. All women interviewed (15 women) and the even ex-members of the cooperative (two interviewed) mentioned that the biggest organizational tension is the gossip among the members because it creates big conflicts. They all, also, think that these problems could be solved if all of the members will perform their duties responsibly.

#### *Tensions with external actors*

Tensions with external actors are, in this case, any type of conflicts between the members of the organization and involved non-member actors. Tensions may arise due to the member's failures, and/or due to external actors dishonest acts. Examples include; not paying suppliers on time, not having enough products to offer when clients arrive, or not assisting to pre-planned events, that might result in mistrust, and/or less support (economical, of knowledge extension and so on). Besides, tensions caused by external actors' failures, though, they are less common, are also possible to arise, and in that case the impact might be extremely harmful. Due to the impacts (see pages 9 -11) the initiative generates, institutions might try to profit from them. It happened several times that clients do not meet their payments. One of these times, almost, represented the group's dissolution. The women were cheated with the amount of 2000 pesos (125.73 euros), which brought them to bankruptcy. Disappointment and lack of money resulted in the provisional (almost for year) breaking up of the group. A part from the economical damages, the deception caused by the external actors directly impacts the women's self-esteem and confidence. It further confirms their belief of being the uneducated, indigenous weak gender that will always be cheated and mistreated by others.

### **The rewards from being part of the "Organización Color de la Tierra"; from the women's perspective**

In the following part, I will describe, based on the women's perception, in which areas they are rewarded.

#### *Personal development*

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<sup>16</sup> PROGRESA is a government social assistance program in Mexico. It is designed to target poverty by providing cash payments to families in exchange for regular school attendance, health clinic visits, and nutritional support. <http://www.redinnovemos.org/content/view/464/103/lang.en/>.  
<http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/Portal/>.

The participation in the different organized activities rewards women with personal development, in the areas of self-revalorization, self-esteem, self-confidence and, also practical knowledge. The application of practical knowledge might be remunerated and generate economic power.

Within the cooperative, the women should take decisions, innovate, give their opinion, take the initiative, and work in teams. They should also, face and find solution to problems, and assume consequences. Sometimes they are invited to share their knowledge and experiences and for the first time, they are the ones teaching others, being heard, being respected and being socially recognized. Considering, that all these behaviours jump out from the "proper role" (see page 3) the initiative, in this sense, works as a "*emancipation motor*".

Moreover, through the participation in the different activities (see pages 4-5), the women are encouraged to learn or improve their production practices: organic compost, vegetable production, fruits and vegetables conservations, organic pest controls, medical tinctures production, and others. They also have access to technologies and information on how to make use of them (coffee roaster, cappuccino machine, ovens, grinder, and dryers). This practical knowledge, and it's application (mark-trading, improving and producing different goods), further encourages their personal development and remunerates their jobs.

Besides, they are also able to build and/or increase their social networks. Through the initiative, they get the opportunity to meet external actors who otherwise, would have never met. For the women, expanding their social networks provides them with security. In case a crisis situation happens, they would have more people to rely on. For example, when a coffee plague was reaching the region, the women knew they could ask producers from Chiapas<sup>17</sup> (that they got to know on a workshop) for help. In many cases, women make private use of their social networks (health issues, personal advise and favours, and help in family crises). Moreover, being included in broader networks changes their role within the family and household.

Traveling, for example, is also a very important reward for the women in the community. 12 out of 15 women had never got out of Cuzalapa. They consider travelling important because: First, they are able to compare their own resources and situation with others. Which enables them to reevaluate their own circumstances. Second, they are able to share experiences with other travellers (all external actors that visit the community). And, third, they have the opportunity to share knowledge and expand their networks.

#### *Impact within their households*

The women's personal development, directly impacts their household. First, the emancipation process is encouraged, which changes the gender dynamics. Second food-safety and security are likely to be reached. And, third, formal and informal education of the household members is improved. According to them improvements in their household grants them with enormous satisfaction.

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<sup>17</sup> Chiapas is one of the 31 States of Mexico it is located in the Southwestern part.

The gender dynamics within the household are impacted: Expenditure-decisions are more likely to be taken by the couple, men are, slowly, getting involved in the household activities, *"Now on our working day, we don't have to bring lunch to the paddock, we just prepare it at home and they take it with them"* (the same answer was given by 8 of the 15 women), and intra-familial violence is slowly decreasing. Moreover, the gender division of labour among the children are also changing; boys help with household activities, and girls receive more support in their studies. Though, changes in gender matters occur slowly (across generations), and with resistance from both genders. All the interviewed women claim that the tensions between them and their partners and/or family have improved since the last decade, when the initiative started.

Furthermore, food security and safety are more likely to be reached for many reasons: A part from the fact that there is more money is available for food. Due to workshops and trainings arranged by the organization, women are more conscious about the importance of healthy foods.

Education of the family members and specially the children is also being improved. The women are able to contribute to the educational expenses. And, as through the organization, they are linked to people and events from the University, this influence and enhance the youth to further educate. From the 15 women, 9 have children old enough to attend university. In total 7 from 15 youth currently attend or attended university. Additionally, one of the women's is also currently doing her bachelor.

#### *Impacts on the community*

The women claim that, the existence of the organization in Cuzalapa directly impacts the local community, the nearby regions and the natural resources. They further explain that as they are responsible for many of the positive changes, they feel rewarded.

The local economy is being boosted: coffee production has become an important secondary source of income for many families in the region. Jobs have been created. The income generation contributes to poverty alleviation, food security and children education.

The organization functions as a collection center that reduces transaction costs for the local producers. Due to transportation costs, peasants were, in many cases, no able to commercialize their products. Now they have a local place to sell their surplus. Especially, honey, Roselle flower and pumping producers from the region and nearby regions are benefited. Even though the organization purchases all products available in the region, last year, it faced a shortage of honey and Roselle flower. This year, it will probably face a shortage of coffee, which demonstrates the positive market response, and also the economic importance of the organization for the small producers.

Moreover, the organization generates knowledge in the community. As they register all inputs purchased each season, they have information about the amount of available trade market products for the next season and the information about each supplier production capacity.

Knowledge extension also benefits the community: In many cases, workshops given at the organization facilities are opened to the public or even designed for the peasants in the region.

As the organization markets local and organic products based on traditional knowledge, local producers are encouraged to produce the same way. The *mojote*, was in the region one of the main staple foods, the fruit was eaten as sweet, the leaves and the crust was prepared as medicinal tea, and the seeds were used for a coffee-like beverage. But, through time its production and consumption has been lost. The women of the organization rescued this "sacred crop", and within the community, its value has being retrieved. It is now commercialized as a coffee-like product, as flour, and sometimes as bread.

The environment is also cared through the women's organic principles-based production<sup>18</sup> systems. The maintenance of the organic coffee plantations of the regions benefits all the living species that belong to the ecosystem. The women proudly claim that they have never suffered any plague problem or any water shortage.

Additionally, the organization has a political voice that benefits the community. The women claim that after the organization was created, many institutions and the government turned their attention to the community. For example, infrastructure was improved (roads and bridges) and a high school was built. In the community, children who wanted to continue studying needed to travel about 20 km to the nearest high school. Due to high transportation costs, it was difficult for many of them to continue studying. As the cooperative started functioning, and the relation to different institutions grew, the women requested the local government for a high school and the request was heard. They also asked for the improvement of roads and bridges, and justified their petition by presenting the register they have on the number of tourists they receive per year.

## **Decisions and strategies; balance between tensions and rewards**

The women from the organization must, on a constant basis, balance their decisions between tensions and rewards. Assuming that in all cases, they will try to choose the option that, in their view, rewards them with higher benefits under fewer tensions. In other words, though women in this study recognized that assisting to any event would probably cause them intra-familiar tensions, they are also conscious that, missing the event might cause them organizational tensions, or, in least of the cases, tensions with external actors. At the end, the key decision factor is the reward. Depending on the value they give to the gained benefits, they think they will get from the event, the women decide whether it is worthy or not to assist/miss the event. For example, the women never miss the monthly meeting because it is payday. So the most probable thing is that no intra-familiar tensions will arise. They also know that decisions on future events will take place at that meeting.

Regardless the decision taken, the women will develop strategies to avoid, or at least minimize the tensions that their decision might cause. Evidence shows that, the women prefer to intervene in organizational strategies to avoid intra-familiar tensions than trying to break the familiar tensions. It is easier for the women to allow their children to stay with them on their working day than to persuade the partner to take care of them for a whole day. It is also easier for the women to invite their partners to a workshop, than to ask their partner for permission to assist and leave their home responsibilities.

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<sup>18</sup> The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM) claims that organic agricultures should be base don the principles of health, ecology, fairness and care <http://www.ifoam.org>.

This might be because breaking the familiar tensions involves trying to change a historical-deeply-rooted cultural phenomenon of "machismo", that even though it is constantly evolving, changes occur slower and with stronger resistance (Salinas Meruane, 2007). While, in the organization the women are directly responsible of performing the change, therefore, the changing process might be easier and faster results can be achieved.

When the cooperative started, many of the women were not allowed to travel out of the region to commercialize their products. Yet, through time they have been applying several strategies and today this situation has changed. For example, the women have invited their partner and children to the sale point, where they involved their partner in the selling process, and in the children care. The purpose was first; to show them how difficult it is to perform both activities at the time; children care, and customer's attention. Second, to demonstrate them the importance of commercializing out of the region, and third, it was intended that the partner could ascertain the relation between them and the external actors.

The partners could, also, see how their female-partner, interrelated with other actors. Moreover, if one male accepts to accompany his female-partner, other males will probably hear from a "man's voice" how the experience was. This male-mouth-to-mouth experience sharing also facilitated the change of minds. Involving the family into the cooperative activities has been, in this case, a successful strategy to cope with intra-familiar tensions. It is also the most common strategy used by the women. Furthermore, spontaneous strategies that involve the usage of social networks are also very common. For example, if costumers are coming and they are not prepared for it, they will involve their neighbours, friends and family to help them by procuring food ingredients, sending messages, adjusting last details or any other required activity they need to fulfil. If the expected woman for an event is missing, they rapidly find between their friends a substitute. In many cases, external actors do not realize about the conflicts. Nevertheless, saving the moment with the external actors does not solve the organizational tensions or the intra-familiar conflicts.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

When the women started the organization, their priority was income generation in order to endure with the situation of poverty and marginalization that they were facing. However, the development of the organization, especially the involvement of external actors has caused unexpected consequences that impacted the women's personal development and therefore their families and the community.

External actors are indirectly responsible of the women's reward that motivates them to continue working. They are the organizers and/or sponsors of the organizations activities, therefore, their intervention in many senses is the culprit of the effects the organization carries with.

The observations provide compelling evidence that the gender dynamics are the most polemic and unexpected impact that the organization has brought to the community. By polemic I refer that it creates more conflict and at the same time it generates more rewards to the women. All rewards mentioned by the women directly or indirectly impacted their personal development including their self-esteem and self-confidences. As all the women feel responsible for the community, the household and their personal improvement, their own valorization has been changed; they are no longer the

indigenous, undereducated mothers and wives with no decision power and subordinated to their men. They are now the women from Cuzalapa, owners and managers of an organization that creates jobs, take care of nature, has a political voice and who earn their own money to sustain their children.

Until the moment, the organization itself, functions as an emancipation motor within the community. However, the activities organized are in their great majority (with exception of travelling) an extension of the women's "proper role", they are not challenging the gender roles and division of labour as such. According to Caroline O.N. MOSER the "strategic needs" of the women, can only be fulfilled when the activities performed, by the women, challenge the local gender roles. In contrast all other activities, even they are also very important, they only fulfil the women's "practical gender needs" (Moser, 1989, p. 1803-1804). Table 1 shows that, in the community, being part of the organization, owning land and machinery, having contact to external actors (especially if they are men), and travelling are activities that break the women's typical role. However, the trainings and duties women are expected to fulfil are an extension of the "typical female duties". Women are expected to do this type of duties, only because they are women.

Even, changes in the gender dynamics was not the women's priority, it is now one of the most impacting side effects, occasioned by the creation of the organization, for the women, and the community. Therefore, I argue that external actors should not neglect it. In contrast, if they are willing to further boost the expansion of the organization, the gender issues should be high in the agenda. Therefore, I strongly believe that the following trainings, and extension activities should be about topics and skills that break with the female's typical role in the community. For example, teaching the women to drive a vehicle. Until now no women from the organization drives car, so every time travel is required they depend on men.

One of the main goals of this paper was to analyse the tensions rural women face when partaking in a collective action in order to question the limits of SSE, and examining why are they so frequently unable to generate greater impact.

Evidence show that the organization's survival its extension potential is, first, limited by its own members, and by the external actors involved.

From the tension analysis, it is concluded that the organization's higher risk to disappear lies on the women's perceptions of the tensions and the rewards they gain from partaking in the collective action. If they perceive that the tensions are higher than the rewards, they will probably leave the organization. Yet, if they feel that the rewards are worth the tensions they have to cope with, then, they will be motivated to continue working, and probably they will be a key factor that enables the organization's expansion.

As the survival and expansion of the organization strongly depends on the tensions and rewards it generates, it is crucial to have a complete understanding of what are these tensions for the women, what generates them, and how can they be avoided. As well as, a complete understanding of what makes the women feel rewarded (in this case the changes in the gender dynamics).

It is described in the paper that partaking in a collective action demands the member's active participation in different events and the responsible compliance of duties. It is



also described that within the community deeply rooted cultural constructions of the gender roles influence the women's decisions and behaviour. Therefore, their active participation in activities and events organized by the initiative, very often, produces tensions with their family members. Though, not complying with the organization's demands also generates tensions, mainly with other group members, and, in fewer cases, with external actors. However, complying with the organizations demands is the women's most frequent strategy of intra-familial conflict avoidance. Nevertheless, this strategy generates further tensions (organizational and with external actors) and negative impacts in the women's personal development.

Based on the evidence, I argue that the organizational tensions alone are not a potential risk for the organizations dissolution. As all the women share similar intra-familial conflicts there is a joint understanding of the causes for the incompletion of the duties, and therefore it is often excused.

However, I argue that the role of external actors might be both a potential and limiting factor for the organizations expansion. External actors are, indirectly and in the majority of the cases, the responsible of the women's rewards that motivates them to continue working. Therefore, one risk of the organization's survival is the dependence on external actors. It is previously shown that the rewards most of the time are supported by external actors (extension trainings and workshops, travels, infrastructure and economic support). The support from external actors is then received by the women and most of the times applied. The results of applying the support, in most of the cases, generate impact (personal, within the household and in the community) that, at the end, rewards the women and motivates them to continue working. In contrast, the women's personal development is constrained the more she misses any type of activity organized by the cooperative. Her personal development is damaged in two ways; first she will have fewer tools to survive in the cooperative, and second, she will be in disadvantage compared to the other members of the group. Moreover, the more she misses events, the less rewarded she will feel. And, the less rewarded she feels, the higher the risk that she quits her job.

Findings of this study indicate that, in case, external actors act dishonest; by taking advantage or cheating the women, this might cause the dissolution of the initiative. Not only because of economical damages, this cheating might cause, but also, because of the demotivating effect it might provoke; the external reaffirmation of their own perception of inferiority.

Results so far suggest that the major risk of breaking off might occur in the case that all tensions happen at once, and no reward is, in the short term, recognized. Such situation might represent the end of the organization.

Based on the evidence I further argue that while SSE models try to integrate excluded actors into the greater society, in the case of women's-collective action initiatives, this inclusion might, at the same time, result in their exclusion at the household level and even at their community. I further argue that regardless of the positive impacts of social solidarity actions at all levels, its potential of extension is limited first by its own members, and secondly by the dominant economic structures in place.



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