

The Role of Grassroots Organizations in the Promotion of Sustainable Indigenous Communities in Mexico

Marina A. Adler, Ph.D.

Department of Sociology & Anthropology
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
1000 Hilltop Circle
Baltimore, MD 21250
USA

Abstract

Mexican grassroots organizations increasingly reject the traditional “sustainable development” and “community capacity building” approaches in favor of alternative livelihood models based on indigenous community autonomy. These alternative models promote indigenous community control over land use, encourage the retention of cultural values and ethnic identity, and define project objectives in terms of local conditions and needs. This research examines the organizational characteristics, missions and strategies of six local grassroots projects in Oaxaca, Mexico through the documentary evidence and interviews with key stake holders. To what extent do these organizations adhere to the “community capacity building” model or embrace the new alternative model? The findings suggest that 5 of the 6 grassroots organizations articulate the new alternative model to a significant degree in their documents and interviews. Two of the organizations are framing their missions and activities completely as restoring indigenous communities and one organization still remains in the capacity building mode.

Key Words: Grassroots organizations, Mexico, sustainable livelihoods, community capacity building, indigenous communities

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s new models of grassroots resistance to the advance of global capitalism and economic development via neoliberal trade policies have surfaced all over Latin America. Under the banner of decentralization, participation, human rights, and indigenization, Northern nongovernmental organizations (NGO) also increasingly “partner” with local grassroots organizations (Mawdsley et al. 2002). However, this “partnership model” operates in a context of a power imbalance that continues to privilege Northern practices and ideas (Craig 2009; Gledhill 2009; Mawdsley et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2005). In an effort to counter decades of outside influences on indigenous communities, the alternative livelihood strategies advocated by new Mexican grassroots organizations focus on local voices and regaining local autonomy. They aim to create sustainable and resilient communities via indigenous community control over land use and the retention of cultural values and ethnic identities. These new projects are not only rooted in local ideas of desired sustainable futures and define project objectives in terms of local conditions and needs. They are also a response to reduced state support for local agricultural production, which has led to the deterioration of internal markets and increased outmigration (Bustamente 1999). And yet there is a question about the extent to which the organizations have developed their own strategies and vocabulary rather than continuing the discourse borrowed from Northern NGOs (Mawdsley et al. 2002).

NGOs did not emerge in Mexico until the 1990s because the state, under decades of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) rule, had a monopoly over the services usually provided in the nonprofit sector (Neal 2008; Verduzco et al. 1999). Thus, Mexico is unique in Latin America in having a young and relatively small nonprofit sector. The NGOs in rural areas vary in size and agenda, from those cooperating closely with Northern NGOs to those based on political resistance and in search of alternatives to neoliberal development (Moore et al. 2007). Today many Mexican grassroots organizations support initiatives that originate within the local communities based on perceived unmet needs or a threat to their environment, culture, or economic survival (see Fox 2007; Moore et al. 2007). According to Rhoades (2006), a new sustainability paradigm has evolved that rejects the de-contextualized top-down management approach of “development” NGOs.

Ultimately, "...the pursuit of sustainability is a local undertaking, not only because each community is ecologically and culturally unique but also because its citizens have specific place-based needs and requirements" (Rhoades, 2006:1). To what extent does Rhoades' observation hold for the Mexican grassroots? In framing their missions and strategies, are these organizations using the same terms as Northern NGOs or are they developing their own ideas and alternative approaches in listening to the communities?

To address these questions, this research focuses on grassroots organizations that target issues related to the sustainable livelihoods of indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. While they are distinctly local in nature, they often have links to regional, national or even international organizations (see Neal 2007; Moore et al. 2007). Specifically, this research compares six sustainable livelihood grassroots organizations in terms of their missions, approaches, and the framing of guiding principles and strategies. I draw on theoretical and empirical work from a number of literatures involving sustainable development, livelihoods, communities, community capacity building, and collective efficacy to assess the extent to which the goals and organizational strategies of the organizations fit with either the "community capacity building" model or an alternative model.

2. Development, community capacity building, and sustainability

From a traditional development point of view successful development projects fuel economic growth via efficient resource use by communities and "improved performances" of individual actors in the global economy. These development goals mirror the performance and efficiency standards of an agenda that seeks to integrate indigenous communities into the global value chain driven by neoliberal policies. Hence the typical projects in this genre aim at teaching actors how to increase their competitiveness in the capitalist market place, disregarding the cultural or social community context in which the livelihoods of the actors are embedded. This means involving community members in producing products intended for sale in an external market, in exploiting their natural resources in an unsustainable and unhealthy manner, or in providing services to outside organizations from which the community does not benefit. That also means that projects grounded in a philosophy of indigenous collective ethics and way of life, and of maintaining livelihoods compatible with nature and limited resources are deemed inefficient and become targets of the "technological innovation" and "professionalization" that is part of Northern corporate culture (see Mawdsley et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2005).

The conventional economic development discourse is contested terrain because it can mask ideological agendas that justify interventions in communities ostensibly to improve the lives of their residents, often with devastating results. Scholars in the World Systems and Dependency Theory tradition have described the often "unhealthy" relationships between highly developed nations and developing nations in the context of global capitalist profit-seeking strategies under the flag of economic development and "modernization." Advocates of "post-development theory" go so far as to consider the idea of economic development itself as an outgrowth of colonialism and imperialism that needs to be deconstructed. Observers of post-colonial uneven regional development argue that historically, economic development provided "an alibi for exploitation" of indigenous communities (Spivak and Plotke 1996: 212). Marginalized groups, their voices and ideas, their cultures, environments, and livelihoods are particularly vulnerable to being ignored, exploited or even destroyed in the process of capitalist expansion (Mawdsley, et al. 2002; Townsend 1999; Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002).

For countries in the Global South, poverty, land use patterns, and natural resources are interdependent. Outside forces and trade policies guided by globalization processes and consumption patterns in rich countries affect vulnerable populations because they are unable to protect their land and themselves. Issues such as deforestation, reduced biodiversity, food security and water scarcity, rather than being alleviated by outside elite NGOs, are often exacerbated, and increase the economic marginality of communities and the fragility of ecosystems. In addition, the emphasis on market value, perpetual economic growth, and profit at the expense of community livelihoods and the environment pose a threat rather than a solution to sustainability. According to this critical view of development, "the market is pre-eminent, and the way to achieve 'development' is to integrate (or subdue) the poor and the marginal more securely into market relations and the monetary economy..." (Mawdsley et al. 2002:5).

Hence it was initially the exploitation of the environment that has led to the focus on sustainability as linked to development. The concept "sustainable development" originated from relatively narrow concerns over environmental protection and the burden placed on natural resources due to rapid population and economic growth (see Aguirre 2002).

Nevertheless, the sustainable development paradigm has broadened considerably (WCED, 1987: 43-44): “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” and “... requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life.” The awareness that social inequalities are inextricably linked to the natural environment frames the definition of sustainable development as embedded in social, cultural, political, and economic development (see Lafferty 1996).

Not surprisingly this concept is quite contested and is criticized as being too vague and ambiguous, mainly because it can be interpreted as being ‘all things to all people’ (Carter 2001). It remains focused more on Northern notions of economic development than on local cultural and environmental sustainability, and market production, consumption, and aspirations aligned with Northern standards of living remain implied. Also problematic are mainstream sustainable development programs that advocate “building capacities” and “capabilities” as well as “human rights” for community development. Although this approach intends to address the limitations of the traditional development model, assumptions about community deficiency are still present. Craig’s (2007) discussion of the “deficit model” implicit in the community capacity building framework illustrates that this mainly top-down approach is based on assumptions of pathology and a lack of skills in the community that need to be remedied by outside (typically Northern) experts. Resulting poverty reduction initiatives aim to expand economic capabilities and opportunities with the goal to integrate the community into the capitalist market economy. However, according to Banks and Shenton (2001:296), “we need to question whose purpose capacity-building is serving and ensure that local residents are not mere puppets in the regeneration game played out by large national, regional and local agencies.”

Capacity building models assume that individual community members will become empowered citizens and increase the quality of their lives through social participation. Rights-based approaches and related ideas of “active citizenship” privilege persons as citizens who bear rights but fail to understand the limits of individual efficacy in a context of limited capacity to exercise these rights (Cleaver 2009; Gladhill 2009). The tension between notions of individual freedoms and rights and indigenous values about collective responsibilities poses a dilemma for human rights approaches (Cleaver 2009). The individualist view clashes with collectivist indigenous conceptions of community rights and collective ownership, in which the community supersedes the individual and her or his rights (Esteva 2006; see also Prakash and Esteva 2008). Based on this critique, some new grassroots organizations in the global South resist the idea of individual empowerment in the context of rights or dependence on the market, and instead focus on community organizing and autonomy. In this debate the concept of “sustainable livelihoods” emerged, where livelihood refers to the use of resources and the actions necessary to live (DeFrece and Poole 2008). Sustainability is achieved when livelihood “can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base” (Chambers and Convey, 1992, cited in DFID 2006). Although the sustainable livelihood framework also focuses on development as main objective, it makes people the priority rather than economics (DFID 2006).

3. Grassroots organizations and the capacities of indigenous communities

There is a relative dearth of recent social science literature on grassroots organizations in developing nations. According to Smith (1999:103), “[G]rassroots associations are locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit groups that manifest significant voluntary altruism as a group.” Moore et al. (2008) add that grassroots organizations tend to be smaller, more informal, and lack the resources of older NGOs. The work of a grassroots organization can focus on *advocacy* on behalf of a community or *organizing* of the community itself (Foster and Louie 2010). While advocates listen and give voice to community concerns, organizers mobilize communities to speak and act for themselves (Foster and Louie 2010). Given these different strategies, the work culture, decision making process, and priority setting differ between organizations that emphasize either community advocacy or community organizing.

Advocacy often involves an emphasis on creating capacities and capabilities related to Northern notions of “professionalization,” accountability, and using “corporate work cultures,” including written and archival documentation, and office space (see Mawdsley et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2005). Roberts et al. (2005) hold that cultures of professionalization and “managerialism,” which cover both “knowledges” and organizational governance practices, are characteristics of NGOs in both North and South.

The authors identify accountability, formality of organization, and capacity building as key elements of managerialism. The “report culture” demands accountability via evaluations and assessments, which have become entrenched in the NGO organizational culture (Mawdsley et al. 2000). In addition, the formalization process of NGOs requires vision statements, strategic planning, and an array of publicity documents, which impinge upon small organizational resources. These features of managerialism are at odds with Oaxacan grassroots organizations’ “deliberate attempts to operate through a more horizontal, fluid, or democratic organizational structure” (Roberts et al. 2005:1853). Northern science expert management techniques clash with the traditional sociality and bonding of communal participation and collective decision-making style.

As part of community organizing, leaders have to be found within the communities, capabilities remembered and fostered, existing resources re-discovered; the focus is on processes, oral culture, rituals, and direct action initiated by the communities themselves (Foster and Louie 2010). The attention shifts from individual capacity building to invigorating collective efficacy and restoring and harnessing the existing collective capabilities (Evans 2002). In this vein, the framework of “indigenous community capacity building” privileges community ownership and self-governance as reflected in project decision-making, leadership and action (Taylor 2003). This focus is expressed well in the words of an aboriginal respondent in Australia: “To restore capacity in our people is to be responsible for our own future. Notice that I talk of restoring rather than building capacity in our people... we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity. The problem is that our capacity has been eroded and diminished [by white colonialists]” (Tedmanson 2003:15; quoted in Craig 2007).

Based on this framing of restoring community capacities, I refer to an alternative model as the “community capacity restoration” model (CCR) to counter that of “community capacity building” (CCB). This alternative approach assumes that the process to restore community capacities is collective and “bottom-up,” guided by participatory and holistic principles residing in the communities’ own practices. The focus is on community-initiated projects that center on local voice rather than on projects brought to the communities from the outside. In addition, community empowerment, autonomy, and indigenous rights are explicit goals, which involve enhancing the well-being of the community by harnessing its collective potential. The “integral development” advocated by many Mexican grassroots organizations, which is a multidimensional approach that promotes sustainability, democracy, and human rights in all their forms, originated in the idea that people, nature, and culture are inherently linked.

Taking an integral approach to sustainability means the use of comprehensive and collaborative long-term projects that include respect of nature, culture, and indigenous rights, rather than piecemeal or temporary solutions to economic problems. It appears then that this grassroots perspective resists external leadership and encourages genuine local involvement to give local priorities voice. The participatory democracy movements in rural Mexico that are rooted in indigenous rights philosophies and that insist on sovereignty over ancestral lands and resources, are an example of this new approach. While the word “development” belongs to the traditional NGO vocabulary, the reference to “integral” neutralizes the connotation with traditional development approaches. This approach would also avoid the community deficit assumptions characteristic of traditional and community capacity building models.

As Gary Craig (2007, 2009) vividly demonstrates, the concept “community” can mean different things in various contexts, which complicates the debate over community capacity restoration. In his classic ideal typical conceptualization of “community” (*Gemeinschaft*), Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) considered the personal interdependence that emerges from living in close proximity based on kinship and neighborhood bonds as its defining characteristic. Community also includes a general sense of belonging, shared values, a common cultural heritage (religion, rituals, language), and ethnic identity. In indigenous communities collective responsibility and mutual obligation rather than individual rights are emphasized (Esteva 2006). In Oaxaca community decisions are made based on consensus in assemblies according to the indigenous governance practice of *usos y costumbres* (English: uses and customs). About 73% of communities in the state of Oaxaca use this assembly-style consensus-based system to vote (Antinori and Rausser 2007). The communal councils are in charge of creating and managing community enterprises. While collective enterprises are organized in and owned by the entire community, the activities and membership are decided on by the councils. Respecting this well-tested capacity to make decisions about community projects and act on their own behalf is a key feature of the community restoration model. Community members “... have within them the capacities and skills for regenerating and enriching their spaces” (Prakash and Esteva 1998: 133-134; emphasis in the original).

Sometimes referred to as “social capital,” this collective efficacy of indigenous communities is a significant component of efforts in community organizing. It refers to community resources that involve neither economic market values nor individual capacities but that are necessary to maintaining resilient and sustainable communities. For example, land and nature, skills, knowledge and practices are collective resources that are based on the “...connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” mentioned by Putnam (2000:19). Similarly, borrowing from Coleman (1990), collective resources are part of the structure of social relationships among people in communities. Thus, a collective resource is a relational one – emerging from interpersonal connections, interaction based on mutual interests, and shared values and knowledge. Peter Evans (2002:56) argues that “collective capabilities,” like those embodied by “organized collectivities,” “...provide the arena for formulating shared values and preferences, and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of powerful opposition.” Hence a related concept central to the alternative model of community capacity restoration is “collective efficacy” (see Sampson et al. 1999). Collective efficacy can be defined as community capacity for action, agency, and exercise of social control, that is, of community “residents’ sense of active engagement” (Sampson et al. 1999:635) on their collectivity’s behalf.

Table 1 compares the traditional community capacity building model (CCB) with the alternative model of community capacity restoration (CCR) in an ideal typical manner and serves as basis of the qualitative analysis. While both models aim to empower communities, one focuses more on advocacy for the communities (CCB) and the other on organizing the communities themselves (CCR). Column 1 shows the characteristics and strategies of a typical 1990s development NGO. As described by Mawdsley et al. (2002) and Craig (2007), they are characterized by uneven partnerships, managerialism, adherence to a deficit model, and focus on individual economic empowerment via production for the capitalist market. The process of capacity building starts with the planning and initiation of projects by outside experts. In contrast, the alternative model in Column 2 emerges from the critique of the CCB model and privileges community voice and project initiation. The initiatives adhere to an organizational model that is based on participatory decision-making, non-hierarchical organization, and the right to community sovereignty and self-determination.

Table 1. Comparison of the traditional community capacity building model (CCB) and the alternative community capacity restoration (CCR) model

Dimension	Community Capacity Building	Community Capacity Restoration
Decision-making process	Partnership with communities; often top-down “managerialism;” include leaders	Lateral, horizontal, bottom-up, decentralized, participatory, based on assemblies; local voice
Project initiation	External initiation in partnership with community leaders	Community-initiated projects; based on community collective decision
Goals	Sustainable development; capacity building; create professionalism and corporate work culture; integrate community in capitalist economy	Sustainable livelihoods; capacity restoration; community control and autonomy; produce and consume local products; meet community needs and increase quality of life
Activities and work plan of projects	Advocate and raise awareness of resources; build capacities; transfer new technology from experts to locals; provide training; find funding	Organize and mobilize community; restore capacities (indigenous knowledge and technology); listen to communities; community sets goals and priorities; build solidarity and share knowledge
Ideological principles and approach	Integration into the capitalist economy; deficit model; focus on community empowerment via individual rights and human and social capital expansion (entrepreneurship); individual efficacy and capabilities	Autonomy from capitalist economy; equity, social justice; collective rights; seek alternatives to capitalism; produce for own consumption and local markets; use alternative production methods; focus on collective efficacy and capabilities of community
Focus of projects	Market- and product-centered; commercial success of individuals and community; adjust to external capitalist economy	People-centered; collective success as autonomous community (social, cultural, economic self-determination); creation of internal markets and food security
Framing of mission on activities	Extensive borrowing of ideas, concepts and terminology from Northern NGOs	Minimal use of Northern NGO concepts and terminology; new frames are developed

4. Methodology

Oaxaca is, along with Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico and also boasts the largest indigenous population. Indigenous status and poverty are linked; inhabitants of indigenous communities tend to be poor and involved in subsistence production for survival. It is estimated that between 60 and 75% of Oaxacans are indigenous, either by self-identification or because they speak one of at least 16 indigenous languages and even more regional dialects. About 80% of Oaxacan land is communally owned land and governed by the indigenous communities in general assemblies. The unique character of the indigenous communities in terms of collective land ownership and decision-making practices, their numerous languages, and their traditional bond with nature and the land complicate the work of grassroots organizations in the area. Hence the organizations realize that integral approaches that reaffirm culture, rights, and identity as well as rediscover community capabilities in terms of knowledge, nature, and agricultural techniques are needed. The data for this study were collected in the rural areas surrounding Oaxaca City in the summer months of 2008. The author gained entry to the organizations by establishing contact with local key informants in the summer of 2007. The six organizations represent a convenience sample of rural organizations based on access to key informants. Efforts were made to include organizations that varied in size and approach. They were selected because they pursue different livelihood strategies in the area (agricultural production, environmental preservation, collectives, community rights, and social and civil participation) and serve indigenous communities in the Sierra Norte (80% indigenous population), Mixteca (40% indigenous), and Valles Centrales (20% indigenous) of the state (see Moore et al. 2007).

The data collection methods included project document review, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, and participant observation in the communities. The site visits and tours of the demonstration projects provide the context for the documentary and interview data. Written documents (mission statements, brochures, informational materials) distributed by the organizations or on their websites were used for the textual analysis. A total of 11 semi-structured interviews with key informants (often in pairs), who are leaders in the organizations and participants in their community's productive projects, are included in the analysis. After verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant, the interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English simultaneously. They varied in length from one to three hours and were recorded by two note takers. The two resultant transcripts were cross-referenced to ensure accuracy and reliability. The interviews were designed to elicit information about the characteristics, history, goals, and activities of the organizations, and consisted of open-ended questions regarding respondent's assessment of the organization (goals, activities, successes, challenges, decision-making), and various characteristics of the projects (history, size, funding, alliances). Respondents varied in age from 28-45, with differing levels of education and Spanish language skills. Four of the respondents considered themselves "mestizo" while the others named an indigenous tribal affiliation as their ethnic identity.

The qualitative analysis examined the mission statements and other documentary evidence of the organizations and the transcripts of the interviews for themes indicating their adherence to the CCB or the CCR model. In their framing of missions and strategies, are the organizations using the same terms as Northern NGOs, following "powerful waves of global development fashions" (Mawdsley et al. 2002:1)? If the grassroots claims of alternative approaches are true, their missions and activities should reflect an alternative discourse of responding to local needs, voices, and ideas. If there is indeed a CCR model with a new set of alternative principles, a move away from language and practices that conform to Northern NGO values of CCB should be observed. On balance there should also be evidence of more efforts to organize (stimulate collective efficacy inside the community) rather than advocate (from the outside) for the communities.

The organizational goals as they relate to either the community capacity building (CCB) model or the community capacity restoration (CCR) model (see Table 1) were coded via the use of related frames. For example, references to "sustainable development," "capacity building," "technological innovation," "technology transfer," "training leaders," and "resource management" are considered to be usage of CCB language and thus indicators of the CCB model. References to "livelihoods," "autonomy," "justice," "integral," "solidarity," "alternative methods," and "community-initiated" reflect examples of language in accordance with the CCR model. Based on the review of the rights-based approaches, the classification of "rights" was divided into "citizen" or "human" rights for CCB and "community" or "indigenous" rights for CCR; if both were mentioned it was considered to be a neutral issue. For the analysis I used 8 terms to indicate CCB and 14 terms to indicate CCR.

The discourse and framing is clearly important for outcomes, such as project implementation, community and donor reception, recruitment, and commitment to the projects. However, evaluating the implementation and outcomes of these organizations' efforts is beyond the scope of this research. The interviews do allow a glimpse of what the organizations consider their major successes and challenges. The ways these outcomes are framed by the respondents will give an indication of the extent to which they feel they are meeting their goals and thus are included in the analysis.

5. Findings

As Table 2 shows, the six organizations included in this study were founded between 1988 and 1997; three were founded before the 1994 Zapatista uprising in neighboring Chiapas (A, C, E).¹ Organizations B and F were founded as a direct result of "zapatismo" and D is the youngest organization. The founding year could be an indicator of adhering to a CCR or CCB model in that the older organizations may be most influenced by Northern NGOs. The organizations vary in size from 5 to 35 workers, including paid staff and volunteers, and the number of communities served ranges from 4 to 53. Hence, organizations A, B, and C are quite a bit larger than D, E, and F. The three organizations that describe themselves as NGOs also have leadership with college degrees, while the staff of the other organizations (B, C and D) is reported to have mainly high school degrees. Organizations B and D are also the only ones that report not receiving government funding. That would make them most aligned with the definition of "grassroots." The main funding sources are foundations, government, and other NGOs. Only one organization (D) relies entirely on donations and community projects. From the site visits, it becomes clear that the organizations under study vary in "wealth" and formal organization. Based on the quality of (or even existence of) the office space (size, appearance, furnishings) and technological support (computers, faxes, farm equipment, indoor plumbing) available, A, C, and F appear to be the most formalized and well-funded. In contrast, D was the least formalized and equipped. Based on these characteristics it would be expected that D (youngest, smallest, least formal, non-NGO) would be most aligned with the CCR model and A (oldest, largest, most formalized NGO) would be most aligned with the CCB model.

Table 2. Characteristics of six grassroots organizations in Oaxaca

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Year founded	1988	1994	1990	1997	1992	1994
Personnel	22 paid; some student internship volunteers	10 paid PT staff; 25 unpaid PT community workers	20 paid staff; 3 volunteers	5-10; unpaid cargo	6 paid FT staff; 12 PT paid community workers	10 FT paid staff ; 2-3 volunteers
Type (self-described)	civil association, NGO	"organization of campesinos," social organization	civil association,	"independent indigenous organization"	NGO	NGO, civil organization
Education of director(s)	BAs	High school	High school; BAs	High school	BA	BA
No. of communities served	53	30	28	14	4	19
Funding sources	State and national government, foundations, international NGOs	Foundations	Foundations, government	Donations, community projects	Government community projects, other NGOs	Foundations public resources, local community donations
Decision-making	Consensus-based via assembly	Participatory democracy	Participatory democracy	Consensus-based via assembly	Coordinator with community leaders	Directive committee with community assembly

¹ In order to protect the anonymity of the respondents I chose to assign alphabetical letters to the organizations instead of revealing their names.

Table 3 shows that the mission statements and objectives mentioned in organizational documents vary in length from 1 short sentence (B) to lengthy paragraphs (D). By using only CCR terms in the mission statements, three organizations (C, D, F) clearly reflect the CCR model, but A, B and E present a somewhat mixed message: organization A refers simultaneously to “recognition of indigenous rights,” “innovative technology” and “sustainable development;” B uses both “autonomy of communities” and “capacity building” simultaneously; and E refers to “sustainable social development” and an “integral” approach to achieve “justice.” The evidence from the interviews reinforces the mixed message of organization A: “The mission of this organization is to promote the recognition of rights for indigenous communities and their quality of life...” and this is accomplished through “work with sustainable development programs.” The interview evidence also confirms E’s mixed message; respondents mention “sustainable development” as a goal while also promoting “... autonomy and free determination of how to use the natural resources.” Interviews from organization B, however, move it from its ambivalent position more clearly towards CCR by neutralizing the reference to capacity building: “We want people to be independent of the market or only use it to sell” and we “struggle for self-sustainability to defend against the forces coming from the outside” and want to “... preserve indigenous knowledge and technology” and “... show indigenous farming methods work and can reduce the food crisis... We encourage communities to return to traditional agricultural techniques. It is an alternative to capitalism economics...” The combined evidence from mission statements and interviews shows that the mission framing of four organizations clearly adheres to the alternative CCR model (B, C, D, F) and two represent a mixed message (A and E).

Table 3. Mission statements of 6 grassroots organizations

	Mission Statement and Objectives
A	<p>“Increase the recognition of the rights of people, their organizations, communities and indigenous peoples, as well as the improvement of the environment and quality of life with a focus on increased social participation and orientation toward sustainability.”</p> <p>“contribute to social change in Mexico by sharing experiences and results of social participation, on human rights, gender equality and the application of innovative technology in the process of sustainable development in indigenous regions of Oaxaca.”</p>
B	<p>“Encourage autonomy of communities and their food security via capacity building.”</p> <p>“To promote integral development through alternative technologies and methodologies, in order to improve and raise the well being of the communities”</p>
C	<p>“Recognition of our cultural values and our capacities as men and women of the region and promoting an integral development process that contributes to the construction of a more just and humane society.”</p>
D	<p>“The reconstruction and free association of our communities, exercising autonomy and direct action along the ... path to: help the communities and workers to organize themselves freely, although it may not be in [our organization]; promote and spread capacities and defend human, territorial, economical, social, political and cultural rights as communities and individuals; advise and accompany the communities, organizations, authorities, and individuals, indigenous or not, that solicit our help in their struggles; to advance sustainable projects that permit the integral development of the indigenous communities, care of the ecosystems, and respect to the peoples; to investigate, document, analyze, and disseminate the movements and struggles of the peoples.”</p>
E	<p>“Promote respect for nature and the sustainable use of natural resources.”</p> <p>“Promote sustainable social development through local and integral processes that are socially, environmentally and economically just.”</p>
F	<p>“To advance articulated civil initiatives and social organization, via public impact, the strengthening of political-economic, social, and cultural experiences with the purpose of contributing to the social inclusion of the Oaxacan communities and municipalities.”</p> <p>“Promote justice, equality, and social participation to increase the quality of life of the marginal parts of the Oaxacan population.”</p>

The analysis of the documentary and interview evidence concerning the strategies and activities to realize the mission of the organizations (see Table 4) focused on similar frames as that of the mission statements.

However, the active and more specific language adds detail that complicates the classification of organizations above. For example, documentary evidence for organization E moves it from “mixed message” in the mission (see above) to become clearly located in the CCB category because of the references to technological assistance, training, planning, provision of services, and capacity building. In fact, E’s documents use 6 of the 8 CCB terms and only 3 of 14 CCR terms. The interview confirms this: the organization provides training and transfers “information on the environment and technology and markets and value of resources” to the communities to identify their priorities, and makes “a plan on how communities can use their resources” ... “We train leaders... “ and provide “evaluations and proposals. The[re is a] need for documentation, a graphic information packet, an annual report.” Organization E adheres to Northern NGO practices and its activities are in line with a strong advocacy role rather than one of community organizing.

Table 4. Framing of activities in documents of 6 grassroots organizations

	Framing of Activities to realize the Mission
A	Plan and develop rural sustainable development projects with communities; use technological innovation in alternative sustainable agriculture to increase food security; manage natural resources and environmental protection; include the perspective of the local people. The programs: promote human, social, political, economic, cultural, indigenous, women’s rights and gender equality; provide legal defense and promotion of justice and equality; promote communication and diffusion of computer technology. “Promote the provision of the basic necessities of the people and the communities within the context of the existing conditions and environment to improve the quality of life.” “Promote regional participatory planning with organizations, communities and indigenous peoples to ensure that development is oriented towards sustainability.”
B	Share experiences and knowledge of alternative agricultural methods among communities and peasants; reforestation and improved crop production for local markets; improve rural livelihoods and well-being; improve autonomy and food security; sustainable development; reduce out migration; coordinate work activities as partners of communities; encourage mutual support; provide training services in sustainable agriculture
C	Capacity building for integral and community development; “work with communities to restore and promote dignified and sustainable modes of life.” Teaching how to cultivate nutritious food that has historically been part of the indigenous diet. Teaching local cultivation of food to improve the food security of rural families and to stop emigration by the youth who are abandoning the countryside for lack of economic prospects.
D	Community-initiated projects stimulated by workshops; promote the provision of basic needs in communities; develop work plan for the community to solve their problems via community-based organizing; encourage self-sufficiency and self-determination; focus on indigenous, human, and women’s rights; help the struggle of the poor against injustice; reconstruct and construct community autonomy; support sustainable projects that permit integral development of the indigenous communities; implement sustainable projects for local production, services, and commerce; improve solidarity; build autonomous community schools and infrastructure.
E	“Encourage and strengthen local initiatives that promote sustainable use of natural resources as a strategy for achieving conservation of nature.” Use a group of technical professionals... “to work for the social development of the rural and urban population.” Manage and conserve of natural resources; provide agricultural and environmental services; community development and planning; training; technical assistance; capacity building.
F	Strengthen civil society via civil initiatives; foster integral community development; improve the quality of life in the communities; strengthen community organizations; help with democratic transformation in Oaxacan communities; to strengthen economic solidarity; to generate actions that promote the creation of civil society. “Restore political, economic, social, and cultural experiences of communities and create an educational process to encourage a culture of equity and diversity, conflict resolution and the common good. Strengthen the capacities of communities for participation and self-management, on the exercise of their rights and social inclusion at the local and regional level.” “Promote initiatives of articulation of civil society, through public dialogue, the linkage of strategic projects and the construction of agendas social in order to contribute to the democratic transformation of the State of Oaxaca.”

While B's documents are more aligned with CCR (8 of 14 terms referring to sharing knowledge, alternative methods, local markets, livelihoods, and only 3 of 8 terms relate to CCB), in the interview the respondent also states: "We create capacities in the ... communities," and the activities include reference to sustainable development and training. The site visit to this organization showed a focus on the use of indigenous technologies (milpa cultivation, capturing rain water, nutritious crop production for local consumption) in conjunction with new technologies (cisterns, dry toilets, reforestation, organic fertilizer, greenhouses) in order to encourage community autonomy. This anchors B in the "mixed message" category. Organization C's mission contained 7 of 14 CCR terms but in its activities it refers to capacity building (1 of 8 CCB terms). A respondent states that they "promote networks for enabling people. Capacity building and understanding... we teach them these abilities" and "... we give them the capacity ... so people can have their own projects." Yet he also described the strategies used by C as to "determine how each group's and community's potential can be developed by themselves" and to "...convince them to organize themselves." This organization focuses on commercial projects, microcredit and education. Thus, the framing of activities moves C from CCR towards CCB territory, landing it in the "mixed message" category.

Not only the documents for A's activities use some CCB language (3 of 8 CCB terms) and CCR language (6 of 14 CCR terms). The respondent for A states "Now we have two pillars: one socio-political and one technological-productive-environmental" for "sustainable regional development on a large scale – the preservation of the environment with low cost technology..." Later he adds: "We are invited into the communities, see [the] needs and interests as expressed by all authorities in the community separately..., we have demonstration projects. We do not promote anything, don't bring in projects, only offer [help] if there is interest and social demand from the population.... [The] communities themselves are the protagonists of this work." This emphasis on technology and sustainable development seems to conflict with that of community-initiation and autonomy. However, a site visit confirms that this organization uses demonstration projects about new and old technologies, such as the production of organic fertilizer, local multi-crop production, greenhouses, and the use of dry toilets in order to enhance community autonomy. The communities themselves decide whether they want to start projects after learning about them. This moves A's location within the mixed message category towards CCR.

Both D and F are most consistently in camp CCR when considering stated activities and interviews. Neither one uses any of the terms associated with CCB in their documents, D uses 12 of 14 CCR terms, and F uses 10 of 14. The respondent from D reinforces the stated activities of community organizing and community-initiated projects, and describes the 5 steps involved in their community-initiated program as shown in their video. While F's documents reflect a somewhat vague reference to activities, in the interview, F states: we "help processes in the communities in their fight to be autonomous. Indigenous people fight for self-determination as indigenous pueblos. We inform friends who later become the authorities in their communities and make positive changes there. ... We [also] create spaces of articulation, analysis and action with other organizations." This reflects adherence to the CCR model.

The combined evidence shows that in terms of framing their missions and activities two organizations clearly adhere to the CCR model (D, F), three represent a somewhat mixed message (A, B, C), and one (E) is in the CCB category. In terms of "degree of adherence to the CCR model," it appears that D ranks highest in affinity with CCR, followed by F. These two organizations make very strong statements about the autonomy of indigenous communities, the use of an "integral" approach with community-initiated projects, and the pursuit of justice and community rights. What is interesting is that these two organizations are at the opposite end in terms of their organizational characteristics. While F is an established, formalized, well-funded, and well-staffed NGO with highly-educated leadership, D is a small, informal, underfunded indigenous organization run by volunteers who do not have a higher education. And yet both serve 14-19 communities and share a similar alternative vision. As the youngest of the organizations, D also appears to be the most "radical," which fits with the expectations based on organizational characteristics. In contrast, as a well-funded and well-equipped NGO, F surprises in its clear adherence to CCR. It appears that in F's case the Zapatista ideology outranks potential influences of Northern NGO practices. In the "mixed message but mainly CCR" category are A, B, C, in this order of ranking, with A and B being closest to CCR. In documents both A and B use 8 of 14 CCR terms and only 3 of 8 CCB terms. Organization C is very similar with 7 of 14 CCR terms and only 1 of 8 CCB terms. Again, based on organizational characteristics A should be more like CCB than CCR. Finally, E is most closely aligned with the traditional CCB model: it uses only 3 of 14 CCR terms and 6 of 8 CCB terms.

Overall, while the predictive power of organizational characteristics in classifying the organizations seems low, there is quite a bit of consensus among the organizations' documents regarding goals and strategies. Five organizations made direct references to integral approaches, social transformation, and justice. Four referenced alternative methods to sustaining livelihoods, local voices in decision-making, and improving the quality of life in communities. Community autonomy, rights, knowledge sharing, and creation of local markets were mentioned by 3 organizations. Only one organization (D) mentioned community organizing in the documents explicitly. In the interviews the rights and autonomy of indigenous communities, community organizing, and finding alternatives to capitalist market production were mentioned by most organizations. Other metaphors used included solidarity (cooperation, alliances, mutual support, sharing knowledge and technology), participatory decision-making, self-determination, and social justice.

In order to neutralize the negative connotation of "sustainable development" promulgated by the CCB model, these grassroots organizations prefer to use terms like "sustainable resource use," "integral development," "orientation towards sustainability," and "alternative sustainable agriculture" or restoring "rural livelihoods" to frame the activities necessary to sustain life, culture, and the environment in indigenous communities. These frames and those relating to production for "internal markets," including "local perspectives," working for "food sovereignty," and finding "alternatives" appear to be intended to contest and delegitimize Northern NGO definitions or terms that reinforce privatization and integration in the capitalist market. The goal is not to completely reject all CCB practices, but to privilege autonomy, indigenous capabilities (knowledges, technology, methods, local voice, community control), and collective efficacy. That means appropriating modern technology and information only when the community decides that it is useful in reaching self-determined goals in line with autonomy. In fact, the importance of lateral sharing of knowledge and technology in solidarity was another theme emerging in this research, particularly in terms of rediscovering indigenous knowledge. Of particular significance here was that the most effective sharing occurs face-to-face, which supports Mawdsley et al.'s (2002) findings. This also points to the value of demonstration projects involving locals and community members as a more effective venue than expert training videos by outsiders or the internet.

There is less agreement among the organizations about which might be the essential philosophy or what is the most advantageous strategy. The inspiration for the founding of their organizations was regarded as rooted in "liberation theology," the "philosophy of indigenous pueblos," the "Zapatista rebellion," or "the thoughts and political practices of Ricardo Flores Magon." While the themes of resistance and change weave through these philosophies, they do not necessarily converge on similar strategies for change. While they agree that community sovereignty is the goal, the path there ranges from cooperation with Northern NGOs (E) to complete rejection of outsiders (D). Interestingly, the interviews reflect a new, transformative framing of livelihoods regarding the quality of life and well-being of communities: "new vision of a new mode of life," "a model of a more just life," and "generate dignified forms of living for the communities."

The interviews provide some evidence as to the perceived success in attaining the organizational missions. The largest successes relate to increasing local production for an internal market (5 of 6 organizations), increasing the projects directed and started by communities (4 of 6), increasing environmentally sound practices and projects (4 of 6) and increasing the use of indigenous knowledge (3 of 6). Not surprisingly the number of successes mentioned correlates with the size of the organizations, making A quantitatively the most "successful," and D and E the least "successful." However, it is impossible to compare such qualitatively different successes as "increasing food security" and "increased knowledge sharing" with "increased size of protected areas" and "improved health, education, and communication services." Overall, it appears that all six organizations made significant strides towards fulfilling their missions, particularly considering the difficult nature of their work in the context of resource constraints and staff shortages. In fact, when considering their main challenges, four organizations named working with international NGOs ("they want us to work by their rules") and three referred to working in a hostile political environment (political oppression, government not supportive of community autonomy) as key problems. Other problem areas were lack of resources, how to improve women's visibility in the projects, and communication with communities (distance, lack of phone access, and misunderstandings). One respondent (F) made a telling comment about potentially (mis-) understanding community needs: how to avoid putting into "the mouths of people what we think they want." Of particular importance are the organizations' efforts to be inclusive and work for gender equality in the face of "machismo" and the traditional system of decision-making in which only men vote.

While between 30 and 50 percent of the staff and community workers in the projects are women, they mainly work behind the scenes.

6. Conclusion

This research sought to describe the experiences of six Oaxacan grassroots organizations with promoting alternative sustainable livelihoods in indigenous communities. The questions guiding this study related to how these organizations differ in terms of framing their mission and activities in terms of “community capacity building” or in terms of an alternative model that aims to restore community capacities. The findings suggest that the organizations under study are clearly committed to finding alternatives to Northern development models based on the priorities of the communities they serve. It also appears that most of these grassroots organizations avoid using Northern development frames and have developed new frames and vocabulary. Among them are a focus on new forms of living, restoring food security via creating an internal market and community autonomy and indigenous knowledge. However, in terms of practices, several organizations continue to use some discourse borrowed from CCB. This confirms previous literature suggesting that Mexican grassroots organizations may use “gatekeepers of knowledge” (Mawdsley et al.’s 2002:111), who “transmit ideas from the international development industry, but seek to open their own visions to local knowledge and felt needs, and to select according to this education.” In fact, this duality is reflected in the difference between documentary evidence and stated implementation (interviews). While the mission statements are generally devoid of Northern terminology, in the interviews respondents often fall back on Northern development vocabulary. It is unclear to what extent this is an artifact of the fact that the interviewers were “Northerners,” or whether this reflects an adherence to learned frames, either through formal education within the prevalent system or through informal use of the internet.

A related issue is the extent to which these organizations avoid Northern frames as a form of resistance. One of the organizations in this study is clearly working “within the system” (E) and makes use of existing resources, disregarding their source, to its advantage. Two other organizations are clearly working to “subvert the system” (D, F) by explicitly engaging in transformative activities and countering dominant market-driven ideologies. However, most organizations appear to simultaneously work within the system they ultimately are trying to subvert; hence the predominantly “mixed message” results. It seems when they consider it advantageous to their cause they will cooperate with Northern NGOs. However, this is often “toned down” in the interviews to reflect the inclination to work for alternative livelihoods. If it is important to funding sources to have “annual reports,” so be it – the organizations will produce reports in order to continue their “real” work in the communities. The goal is to support sustainable communities that are resilient and to regenerate them so that there is internal social renewal and less out-migration.

The interesting fact that an established, relatively large, formalized, and well-funded organization (F) shares largely the same alternative vision and strategy as a younger, small, informal, and unfunded organization (D) contradicts previous arguments about the correlation between larger organizational size, formalization, and funding, and the alignment with Northern NGO missions and strategies. It appears that the shared fundamental ideology of the group plays an important role in sustaining their vision. Both of these organizations are inspired by indigenous leaders whose ideology counters current global ideologies of neoliberalist individualism. Both also adhere to strong visions of alternative societies based on social justice and autonomy from capitalist markets.

In support of previous studies (Mawdsley et al. 2002), I also found that face-to-face communication is crucial to indigenous knowledge restoration. The move towards demonstration projects and face-to-face presentations and communication is producing successful projects for the communities. Also confirming previous research is the fact that decision-making in the communities remains very much male-dominated terrain. Unfortunately 10 of the 11 respondents in this study were male, even though according to the information given in the interviews women are very much involved in the projects, albeit behind the scenes. Efforts to increase the status and rights of women are a priority in all of these organizations but progress appears to be slow. Future research should examine the involvement of women in grassroots organizations that do not specifically focus on women’s economic participation. In Mexico the political climate has been hostile to community organizing efforts, community autonomy, and the return to traditional practices of mutual exchanges and knowledge sharing. According to one respondent, when the government introduced the notion of “paid work” to the indigenous communities, their dependence on money in general and the idea of receiving money for work has replaced the traditional *cargo* system in which community members are obligated to perform work benefitting the entire community.

Because the grassroots organizations in the CCR model want to restore customary ways to sustain livelihoods in the communities and thus remove them from government control, the government resists these efforts. The findings of this research suggest that there is no single solution for all grassroots efforts to organize communities. Competition for scarce resources, the hostile political climate, and divergent local needs and conditions determine to what extent organizations are able to realize their missions. There is a clear distrust of Northern “partners” and despite existing cooperation and networks among local organizations, competition for scarce funding creates conflict. However, it appears that the community restoration model is superior to the CCB model in its focus on people as part of a collective rather than as individuals. By definition, this approach counters the individualism of the CCB framework and its attempt to integrate people into the existing neoliberal market structures. Outsiders who are products of this neoliberal system are to a degree consciously or unconsciously “contaminated” by its ideology. Efforts to resist this contamination of indigenous communities are particularly important in preventing the continued loss of cultural knowledge and languages among the young as well as their out-migration.

The discourse of sustainability is shifting from a capitalist market-based and individual rights-based development approach to an alternative one of sustaining livelihoods, internal markets, and collective rights. Grassroots organizations have introduced the radical notion that the communities themselves should decide what they want to do and how in order to sustain collective well-being. The Northern imperative that communities have to “develop” begs the question into what they should develop. The neoliberal development path seems to lead to the extinction of indigenous communities rather than in their sustained existence. The community organizers recognize that local initiatives are bound together in confronting the process of global economic restructuring beyond regional or national boundaries. Resulting alternative livelihood models are in opposition to economic development imposed from the outside, and include just distribution of resources, participatory decision-making, and respect for community rights and the environment. Of particular importance is the restoration of “lost” capacities that reside within the indigenous cultures and can empower them to create a future that is autonomous of the neoliberal capitalist market. According to Firor and Jacobson (1993:719), it is possible “...that self sufficiency and barter would serve the Third World poor better than improvements in cash income.” This idea and whether alternative livelihoods are viable options should point the way to larger scale studies of the sustainability of autonomous indigenous communities.

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