

Agroecology for Peace and Development

Country of Implementation: Mexico

Sponsoring College: Lake Forest College

Project leader: Mauricio Calderón Castro, Mexico, Lake Forest College, UWC in Mostar

Final written report

The Agroecology for Peace and Development project aimed to protect the tradition of solares in the village of Sotuta, Mexico. Solares are an agricultural backyard found in many traditional Maya houses. The project's purpose was engage the local youth to turn the solares into more ecologically and economically wealthier places through agroecology, a kind of agriculture that promotes biological diversity and rejects the use of pesticides, among other principles.

This project solely used the funds provided by the Davis Projects for Peace initiative.

Being born and raised in Mexico City, one of the largest urban areas of the world, I lacked exposure and connection to nature and agriculture. During my time at UWC Mostar, I led the Environmental group and volunteered many times in a local farm so I wanted to do something similar in my home country.

There are many overlapping issues that the village of Sotuta faces like poverty, food insecurity and loss of indigenous heritage. At a national level, the Mexican government rarely prioritizes the development of a rural indigenous village like Sotuta and has rather preferred to develop the cities (particularly those in the region connected to tourism like Cancún and Playa del Carmen). Furthermore, a perhaps unintended consequence of the implementation of the market economy in the economy starting in the year 2000 through the North American Free Trade Agreement is the inability of local farmers to compete with international food prices as farmers often lack governmental assistance to grow their crops.

I initially wanted to execute an urban farming project in Mexico City and thus contacted many urban gardens in the city. However, I ended up networking through Facebook with Mishel Mussali, a Mexican UWC-USA and former Davis scholar in Earlham College. She works for CULTIVA, the Sotuta-based non-governmental organization that I ended up partnering with for the Davis grant. Working in Sotuta was a deeply rewarding experience. Yucatán has much hotter weather than what I am used to (around 35 degrees Celsius during the day) so that proved challenging at first, especially when working outdoors. Conversely, Sotuta is a very safe, quaint village full of greenery where I biked everywhere. Mexican people are known to be very warm and welcoming and the people of Sotuta were no exception.

I never thought that the project was going to fail because CULTIVA has strong bonds with the community and specifically the women we worked with. CULTIVA made sure to communicate what the Davis grant was and the project it was funding to the women in a timely and clear manner.

I did not personally perceive any communication barrier between me and the people from Sotuta. However, I came into the project aware that being a white middle-class man from Mexico City could not be farther away of an identity to most people in Sotuta. I tried my best to keep an open mind and be mindful of any unintended biases I could have and I think I succeeded at having a good rapport with everyone.

I define peace as a shared experience of wellness and prosperity among peoples. In Sotuta, everyone knows each other and there's a strong sense of community and responsibility for one another. There is greenery everywhere too and life very much depends on nature. Peace is about understanding that different lifestyles like the one in Sotuta are possible.

The project's short-term contribution to peace is two-fold. First, the local young women working in the solares who are receiving a small scholarship thanks to the Davis grant could give their full attention to the

project and they are using that money for their immediate needs and schooling. Second, part of the grant was used to purchase tools and infrastructure like irrigation systems and greenhouses that will immediately increase the productivity and profitability of the women's harvest. In the long term, the women benefitted by the grant will share their wealth and knowledge with other people in the community. This empowers them to be independent in a village where most women are economically dependent to their husbands.

Us people from Mexico City have a strong prejudice against those outside the capital. We call them *provincianos* or countryside people and we often say the term with contempt. Now, I understand the life of people living in the countryside better because I spent a full month in a rural community like Sotuta meeting people, learning from their lifestyle and knowledge and working the land with them. Personally speaking, I can now fully appreciate the enormous amount of work that takes growing a single piece of fruit or vegetable. I think many people take that for granted and I know I will not anymore.

No, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact in the execution of the project. I am lucky enough to be vaccinated and so are many older adults in the village but not yet everyone. Since Sotuta is a small village, the community transmission of COVID-19 remained very low and did not pose a threat to our activities, most of which were held in person.

Personal statement: This Davis project is but a small step in providing the women of Sotuta the opportunity to economically thrive while also protecting their cultural heritage and promoting healthier lifestyles.

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