

WORLDVIEW

Take Home Reading

San Pablo Tihaltepec is a small community situated in the southern portion of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico's second poorest behind the state of Tabasco.



Mexico Community Asset Mapping a tool for rural organization.

The journey to San Pablo Tihaltepec, winding up narrow dirt roads and driving past small concrete homes and parcels of land, does not prepare one for the burst of colour and energy in the small but well kept town square. The brightly painted town council building greets newcomers, banners flapping in the wind. Although the sun has barely risen, a long line-up of elderly women and men has already formed at its doors. Today, they will receive their elder assistance package from the government, a small box of goods to help make ends meet. On the

other side of the paved courtyard, small children carry their lunch around and eat clumsily-getting more enjoyment than nutrition from Frisbee-sized pork rinds covered in hot sauce and a sprinkle of lettuce. The gentlemen of town sit or walk, and deftly tucking and pulling at the long plastic strands bunched in their hands, they skillfully form multicoloured baskets with what seems like the greatest of ease. A man walking past looks up to greet me warmly, his fingers still busily on task, bending and tucking the purple, green, and pink pieces.

Elizabeth Rodriguez

community assets

The biological and cultural richness in the area of San Pablo Tihaltepec is in stark contrast with the poverty that residents of the area live in. San Pablo, for short, is particularly known for corn, the food staple of Mexico. Called the cradle of corn biodiversity, the state of Oaxaca boasts more corn breeds than the rest of the Mexican states combined; each species is adapted to particular climates, soil conditions, and food preparations. Agriculture remains the main occupation, but changing climate and lowered rainfall may pose a threat to the livelihoods of these inhabitants.

Elizabeth Rodriguez is a young Mexican woman working with the environmental organization GAIA, based in Oaxaca. She often has to travel to rural communities as part of her work. Today, she has gathered with a group of citizens from San Pablo Tihaltepec for a Community Asset Mapping exercise with some of the workers of GAIA. Community Asset Mapping identifies the strengths, values and resources in the area. The goal of this three day workshop is to foster and support rural community organization, to



Community Asset Mapping...
Using timelines, drawings, games and discussions the residents of San Pablo Tihaltepec work out a positive plan around the assets in their community.



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unite the community around a positive identity and a collective cause.

Elizabeth begins the workshop with broad discussions defining the task at hand, which is to discover the assets of the community. Assets can include many different things. They can be natural, like the rolling hillsides, trees, agricultural land; man-made, like community centres, churches; social, like youth groups; economic like a government assistance package, services; or even intangible things like skills, expertise and even people. Different mediums are used to facilitate the workshop. Most activities are visual and verbal, as the majority of participants cannot read.

It is an interesting task for Elizabeth to lead this workshop since Spanish, although the national idiom of Mexico, is the second language of the residents of San Pablo. An indigenous group called the Mixtec inhabits San Pablo Tihaltepec. The Mixtec are a Mesoamerican people that were never conquered by the

Aztec Empire, the dominant indigenous group of Mexico from the 14th to 16th centuries. This rich Mixtec culture, native to the Oaxacan highlands of Mexico, also managed to survive the times of the Conquista, or the European Conquest that began in the 1500's.

It is for this reason that Elizabeth works hard maintaining and encouraging community organization because, as globalization spreads further and further into rural and indigenous communities, there becomes a need to accommodate for the preservation of ancient cultures and customs and also to find acceptable ways for these communities to integrate into the global community.

An important activity for this community in discovering their assets is making timelines. The residents decide that in order to plan for the future of the community, it is important to understand its past.

Throughout the workshop ideas begin cropping up. Corn is identified as something of great importance

WORKING TOGETHER

St. John River Valley Community Asset Mapping Project



Traditional Mixtec Dress
Elderly Mixtec Women wait in line patiently for a governmental assistance package. These women still speak the Mixtec language which comes from Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.

and value to the community, but no formal seed saving and protection system exists. Many villagers express interest in obtaining milk in their communities in order to increase the health of their children, but one man questions how this could be afforded.

Food security, a term that means food access and production, is a common concern in rural areas of many developing countries including Mexico, where the distance between places, services and amenities is great. Community asset mapping helps communities to organize themselves to use those assets to

overcome community concerns and rural difficulties. The process helps communities identify their strengths, generate ideas for community action, and project a vision for the future. In the case of San Pablo Tihaltepec, the community identified food security as a concern, corn being an asset. With good community organization the community will be able to take action to address the issue of food security, making use of the strengths and capacities that they have identified.

The participants in the asset mapping workshop also identified basket weaving as an asset in the community; it was agreed that basket weaving can be an alternate source of income generation. Weaving is a skill that is unique to the area, and it is

traditionally practiced by many men in San Pablo. However, it is not being passed on to the youth. In an animated discussion, participants explored the options for alternative income through the sale of different woven products.

The Falls Brook Centre in New Brunswick, Canada uses the same process of community asset mapping for strengthening community organization in rural New Brunswick. The St. John River Valley Community Asset Mapping Project was created to engage positive planning within the region. The Community Asset Mapping process has helped the communities in the region identify their strengths, ideas for actions and a vision for the future. The idea of asset mapping provides a very useful starting point in community organization as it produces a common view of what is considered important in a community. The process of community asset mapping is one example of common ties between Latin American countries, like Mexico, and Canada. The same type of exercise in strengthening community organization can be used anywhere in the world, despite the geographic location or a difference in language.

Discussion Questions

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1. What cultural group do the people of San Pablo Tihaltepec belong to and why is their culture so rich? Explain from a historical context.
2. Elizabeth used visual and verbal activities during the workshop because the majority of the participants could not read and spoke Spanish as a second language. What are some of the social and economic barriers created by illiteracy? Is illiteracy an issue in Canada? What is being done about it?
3. What does the term asset mean? a) What do you value most about your community? b) What are the two main assets identified by the people of San Pablo Tihaltepec. c) Compare your community values to the community assets identified in San Pablo.
4. What are your biggest concerns for the future of your community? What can you do to address these concerns? What can the community do as a whole to support a healthy future?
5. What are threats faced by small rural communities around the world?

