Food Systems Issues in the Juchitán region of Oaxaca, Mexico
University of Vermont, Oaxaca Food Systems Class

Juchitán is located in the southeastern part of the Mexican state of Oaxaca. This is in the Isthmo de Tehuantepec region. The municipal seat and the larger District are both named Juchitán. Many of the inhabitants in this area are indigenous people, primarily Zapotecs and Huaves. It is an area not well-frequented by tourists. According to Wikipedia, most people are engaged in agriculture, with fishing along the coast, and some lumbering inland. The isthmus has reliable north-south winds. Recently, many wind farms have been built here.

Farming Practices.

Farming in Juchitán, as in much of Mexico, blends traditional and commercial agricultural by using old and new methods. This was exemplified on a farm we visited in Nejapa de Madero on the way to Juchitán, about two hours outside of Oaxaca City. This 10-acre “small-scale commercial” farm is located in a flood plain surrounded by other farms like it. The gravity-fed flood irrigation system allows for the production of a variety of crops including tomatillos, watermelon, cantaloupe, papaya, and onions. The farmers planted onions and tomatillos this year, rotating crops over time. Last year they grew cantaloupe and watermelon. Corn was grown in years past. On the advice of government representatives they began using agrochemicals to suppress insects and “plagues”. They make applications fairly frequently, especially on the tomatillos, which they spray twice a week. However, even with the chemicals, the tomatillo crop this year is low due to pests.

Next we visited a farm in Juchitán with about eight acres in production. They have a traditional milpa—corn, beans, and squash all growing in one field—as well as monoculture fields with commercial crops such as tomatoes. The milpa is rain-fed and grown with organic practices, while the tomato field is irrigated and occasionally treated with agrochemicals, mostly insecticides to deter leaf-cutter ants and fertilizers to add nutrients. In the irrigated field were criollo tomatoes—more or less the equivalent to what we call heirlooms in the U.S. These are well-adapted to this region and produce better fruits than other commercial varieties.
The bean in the milpa is a commercial variety, while the corn is *Zapalote Chico*, a traditional criollo variety. This is an example of the mixing of traditional and modern practices, which can be seen in planting methods as well. Although farmers often use tractors to break up the compacted, dry soil, many only plow and plant with a team of oxen.

![Mature corn plants in a traditional milpa field where beans and squash were also grown.](image)

**The Fish Market.**

Like many coastal communities, fishing is part of the culture here. At a local fish market, vendors sell many types of fish and other kinds of seafood. The market we visited was only about a block and a half long, with around 100 vendors. The market opens at 4 a.m. and by 6 o’clock is well under way, with fisherman arriving with their catches from the previous day. Fish are unloaded from an ice bed on top of trucks, a coordinated effort that requires several people to pass the fish down from up above, and then to lift the depleted bucket full of fishy ice-melt from the top of the truck.
While seafood makes up the majority of available products at the market, some vendors also sell fresh produce and prepared foods like empanadas and smoothies. The wide range of seafoods offered at the market includes shrimp, crabs, and octopus, as well as the local delicacy: sea turtle eggs. Although sale of these eggs is technically illegal, they are a foodstuff historically associated with the Istmo region, and the people here commonly eat them as a festival food. The fish were freshly caught from the coast, less than an hour’s drive away from the city. The shrimp and crabs came from the lagoon, which was even nearer. The small size of the market indicates that most of these fish are caught only for local consumption, and not for sale or transport outside of the region. When asked about the origin of the fish, the vendors just shrugged and said the fish came “from the ocean”. However, to our surprise they told us that the vegetables and other produce came from the Abastos market, many hours away in Oaxaca City.

Visit to a Migrant Safe House.

Hermanos en el Camino is an immigrant ‘safe house,’ or albergue, located in the city of Ixtepec which lies on a cargo train route from Central America to the US. Until recently, migrants would hop on the top of the trains and embark on the arduous and dangerous journey northward. During this time, this albergue would receive around 300 people per day who would spend the night and be provided with basic amenities such as food, water, a bed, and a shower. The average stay was 1 to 3 days as they waited for the departure of the next train. After the passage of Mexico’s “Southern Border Plan” in 2014, everything changed.
This plan was a partnership agreement between the US and Mexican governments to attempt to decrease the impact of migration on the northern Mexican border. The advertised goals of this project were to increase the safety and to protect the rights of Central American migrants travelling through Mexico. Although this plan is well underway, the mission has yet to be achieved. One primary project of this Plan is to block access to the train lines with high walls and barbed wires. This step, however, does not address the persistent threats of violence, famine and poverty that plague Central American countries. Instead of relying on the direct train lines, migrants (like Dona Gloria and her three young girls, whom we met at the safe house) are left to discover new, and more dangerous, routes. Due to lack of funds, their journey is now by foot.

Since this plan was passed, the numbers of migrants passing through the Ixtepec albergue have dropped significantly, as migrants are no longer concentrated along the train routes. They are now spread all over the country. This reduction in numbers has greatly shifted the structure and management of the safe house. Now people tend to arrive by the tens per day instead of by the hundreds. They also stay for much longer periods of time as they gather funds and figure out ways of continuing their journey.

_Migrant women and children at the safe house near Juchitán_
There are a few primary factors that have accelerated the rate of migration. First is the dumping of U.S. commodities, especially corn, at low prices in Latin America. Small-scale agriculturalists cannot compete and they stop farming for a living and seek other work. Another related factor is environmental degradation. Second, “green revolution” technologies implemented throughout Latin America introduced small scale farmers to chemical inputs for production. Not only did their use of synthetic inputs accelerate soil degradation and water pollution, it also jeopardized the ability of peasant farmers to sustain their own food production without dependence on agricultural inputs produced by corporations. Third, there has recently been a great increase in violence in some Central American countries, which has caused an exodus of primarily women and children from places like Honduras. This is the story of one family we met at the safe house, who fled Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras, as a result of increasing violent threats from gangs.

In the U.S., we currently depend on the Latin American migrant populations for much of our nation’s agricultural labor. Often these agriculturalists come north and work with the very industry that put them out of business in their own countries. It is up to our country to stop ignoring this international crisis, and to take action to reverse our destructive policies in Latin America.

A Third Gender Space.

In the city of Juchitán gendered spaces are much different than elsewhere in Mexico because there exists a third gender, the Muxhes. These are people born male but behave and dress in ways associated with the females. As such, they take this role of a third gender that does not fit the typical gendered spaces of men and women, but lives and works within both.

The role of the Muxhes in Juchitán challenges the typical gender roles in the Mexican food system, where men are predominantly involved in food production (farming) and women prepare the food (shopping and cooking). The other way we see men and women most separated in the Oaxacan food system is in markets. Typically women are seen selling from small tables or baskets in marketplaces, while higher up the supply chain are wholesale vendors who are mostly, if not all, men. The Muxhe have transformed the gender roles and stereotypes that are most present in Oaxaca food system.

Impact of Industrial Wind Development.

In the Isthmus region of Mexico, once can see firsthand the tension between food sovereignty and renewable energy production. The Mexican government has promoted investment in large scale wind projects to meet the demand for renewable energy from multinational interests. The harmful implementation of these wind energy projects has energized indigenous groups to
advocate for their communal land rights, and to object to negative impacts on the environment, their health and their agricultural way of life.

An older campesino named Mario Santiago Martínez told us his story of wind-power production and its relationship with his farm. In 2006 he rented some of his arable land to a multinational energy company for promised compensation of $130,000 MXN (or $8,500 USD). The company installed a generator about 120 feet from his house. Later, the company changed hands and the promised rental payment fell to just $200 USD. The financial dealings left him disillusioned with the company, and the effects that he began to notice on his farm led him to question the technology itself.

Señor Martínez noticed that his well, once a source of potable and irrigation water, had become contaminated with oil. The lubricant used to keep the wind turbines running smoothly had seeped into the groundwater. The raised roads built to access the generator made his fields “como una alberca” (“like a swimming pool”). Rainwater was funneled between the roads and, rather than soak into the ground, saturated the soil to the point it flooded his fields. Señor Martínez told us that his squash and watermelon crops weren’t growing to the same size and quality that they had in previous years. The fruit produced was smaller and more likely to rot and split open in the fields. He told us, very gravely, that “the generators are taking the energy from the land.”

A traditional oxen team pulls a plow in a field dominated by wind energy generators in Juchitán.
We also visited a commercial farm located, like an island, in a sea of wind generators. Some were no more than 60 feet from the fields, close enough that the shadow of the blades crossed the fields in an eerily regular way. The farmers here said they were bothered by the nearly constant noise produced during the windy season. They also complained about neighbors who left their land unplanted and instead relied on their rental payments. Fewer farmers are now producing their own food, and those that do are put at risk by the side effects of the wind turbines with relatively little benefit.

On the Isthmus “clean energy” has turned out to be not so clean, nor has it been made available to those whose lands it has impacted. Financial concerns, environmental impacts, and fear about losing food sovereignty to pollution and rental payments have combined to fuel the Assembly movement. As one member of the Assembly put it “We’re not against renewable technology, but we want it to benefit humanity”.

**Popular Assembly of Juchitan**

The Popular Assembly of Juchitan was formed in 2006 as a response to the lack of information around government development projects and their impact on the local people. One project of the Assembly is the Radio Totopo Collective, which serves as a local source for authentic news. (Totopo is a flat corn product similar to a tortilla that originated from Zapotec peoples of the isthmus.)

The Assembly asserts popular resistance to large international projects that exploit peasants such as Plan Panama, Free Trade Area of the Americas, and wind power development in their own neighborhoods. These large-scale neoliberal development projects often favor the desires of multinational corporations over the needs of local communities, and Juchitan is a case in point. Wind power generators dominate the former milpa lands surrounding the city center as far as the eye can see. The self-sufficiency of the local campesinos and their families as well as the food security of the region is now vulnerable as energy companies buy up all the arable farm land for production of renewable energy to export to multinational corporations like Coca Cola, Bimbo, LG, and Walmart.

This wind power scheme started some 20 years ago when 6 pilot projects were launched in the region with the stated goal of providing renewable energy for the local communities. In 1992, international energy companies began breaking up the lands around Juchitan like the scramble for Africa. In 2004 multinational companies were signing contracts. The companies offered farmers the chance to send their children to school, and to sell their land to help produce energy for the local communities.
As explained to us, according to the Mexican constitution the land of Juchitan is considered communal and cannot be sold in individual plots, thus nullifying the actions of these companies. Additionally, the federal agrarian registry is supposed to protect such communal land-holdings from the illegal sale of individual plots for wind energy production.

Assembly members said that they are against the methods of implementation of the wind energy projects but that they are not against renewable energy projects that support their local communities. The issues at play reflect a violation of the traditional system of land tenure, a corrupt system of corporate-led neoliberal development schemes, and a threat to the future of local farmers that are essential to a local food supply. The Popular Assembly of Juchitan is an example of how people being disenfranchised can stand up for their rights by promoting transparency, identifying injustices and advocating for positive change.