

Giving Back to the Community

Mexico creates economic opportunities for its indigenous citizens

BY CARLOS ALFONSO SANDOVAL MIRANDA



Assessments sponsored by the World Bank have estimated that every year since 1990, roughly 10 million people worldwide have been displaced by infrastructure development projects. For a vast majority of the indigenous/tribal people relocated because of these projects, the experience has caused negative impacts in cultural, economic and health terms. Mexico has taken an active role in reducing economic impacts to these people through an innovative sustainability program.

Indigenous populations displaced by development projects pose a universal challenge. Being forced to leave one's land and home because of a dam, reservoir or highway is not only immediately disruptive and painful, it is also fraught with serious long-term risks. The relocation may intensify their poverty status, and with their livelihoods impacted, these individuals face the

uncertainties of resettling in unfamiliar and often inhospitable locations.

Mexico has demonstrated what it takes to offset the economic impacts of its major infrastructure projects. As part of the country's sustainability platform, several groups came together to identify how to best transform some of its corroded land, while bringing important economic relief to local citizens and farmers.

The Role Model for Sustainability

The idea to revive cocoa production in Mexico was a long time in the making. The "Mexican Criollo" cocoa was once widely honored for its superior quality. Over the years, it became sparsely distributed among Mexican plantations, replaced by other more profitable options. Many farmers instead began cultivating maize, bananas and soya beans, while others sold their land to companies like Pemex, the Mexican state-owned petroleum company, to make new infrastructure projects possible. Also, the introduction of lower quality cocoa, which has a higher resistance to disease and produces more product with less risk, further depressed the market for Criollo cocoa. Over time, it became nearly impossible for Mexico to provide high quality cocoa as it once did.



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Reviving cocoa production would help Mexico achieve economic, environmental and social benefits to those who produce and consume cocoa-based products. Yet, carrying out a sustainability project of this magnitude requires a large initial investment. Draft rights of way are still considered a source of funding for sustainable cocoa production in Mexico. As a result of several different Pemex projects and other state initiatives, land was obtained in order to establish this vital program.

This important mission brought together Pemex Directors, government from the states of Tabasco and Chiapas, local universities, and more than 30 young professionals that are university graduates and members of the local communities where the project was initiated. In addition, technology development centers got involved, as well as several researchers and scientists from America and Europe who offered their services on a pro bono basis.

The first model of its kind, the project is located on 300 hectares (roughly 741 acres) in the

Mexican tropics. The land chosen for the project came from old cacao plantations and grassland, the latter being the most degraded of the original forest area. Today, more than 200 farmers are involved, and thanks to the high-quality Criollo cocoa selected for this project, the trees will bear fruit two years after being planted. With a breakeven expected within four to five years, investments will be recovered roughly five years after starting the project. Another benefit comes from generating carbon bonuses because of the soil's ability to absorb additional carbon. This not only helps the environment, it contributes to a more positive image for PEMEX and other project stakeholders.

Five years ago it would have been unthinkable to see the investments in cocoa by individuals, private banks, the federal government, and the state government. Today, this is a reality. Creating jobs and ensuring that displaced people are given something in return is a model for success. This kind of effort can—and should—be duplicated around the globe. 🌍

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