

“A WORLD WHERE OTHER WORLDS CAN FIT”

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BASED ON DIGNITY AND JUSTICE



Photo. Mural in the Zapatista Caracol of Oventic

"The flower of the word will not die. The masked face which today has a name may die, but the word which came from the depth of history and the earth can no longer be cut by the arrogance of the powerful"
EZLN.- [Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle](#)

The question that set off this journey to observe indigenous Zapatista communities was: What are the characteristics that allow the Zapatistas to move at a steady pace towards the third circle (abundance) despite the ongoing repression they receive from a part of their environment? What are the agreements that make them unique? Despite not having received an answer from the Civilian Liaison Office to the letter we sent asking if they could receive us at one of the Caracoles, my natural appetite for understanding these journeys of collective transformation brought me to this exploration. Other fellow travelers joined me and I am grateful to them because they became my accomplices and enriched this journey on many different levels. I can say that they helped me shape this text; I am the pen and we are all writing.

I embarked with clean and open eyes, without expectations; only the idea of living close to a small part of the Zapatista agreements. The experience was much more enriching and transformative than I expected: the art, the roads, the local swimming hole where the community and the Zapatistas coexisted, children playing in the Caracol's river, the conversations and work we carried out, the bright moon and star-filled sky at 3 a.m., muralists creating and building together, and life breathing all around us. It was easy to forget that the possibility of repression exists because one felt so sheltered, so welcomed and protected by these indigenous communities.






A sign at the Balneario Tzaconeja administered by Zapatistas: "Every piece of this earth is sacred to our people, every twig, every ray of light, and every drop of water, take home your waste"

This collective is quite large; it is a community of communities where scarcity represses, shrinks and seeks to crush. They took up arms on January 1st, 1994, only during the first weeks of the Movement in order to make themselves heard and visible. Since then, military offensives have been nonviolent with the help of the civilian population. In December of 1994, half of Chiapas was declared "rebel territory" without a single shot having been fired. That was the moment the

Zapatistas announced the formation of 38 autonomous municipalities. The whole movement is built upon the intelligence of words, the compassion of the heart and on willpower, which have made it evolve and grow on several levels.

As in any collective evolution, some have deserted and others have joined during this 20-year road. The Zapatista communities have managed to plant seeds and sow them with dignity and justice, as they say; also, might I add, with love, respect and patience. They are still small trees living and breathing in different spaces of the jungle; they are still small forests, seeking out other forests that have the same intentions, in their quest of becoming more visible in the world. Their history has made them feel alone at times; their struggle has made them feel unique in the country. This is why so many questions came to my mind, and from the little I could see, hear, feel, and research (because their history is so rich) these are the agreements I believe have spread throughout the entire collective.

	RESOURCES How much?	ALLOCATION Who decides?	VALUE By what criteria?	ORGANIZATION How shall we interact?
POSSIBLY - LIGHT 		Occasional examples of all five		Collaboration with all kind of collectives
	The "what about you?" school as a fundamental inquiry style for the movement and for incubate possibilities	Group, Individual, Nature, Spirit	Collective health as a fundamental axis of the community (order, harmony of social fabric and relation to Mother Earth)	Collaboration with other collectives similar to them
DEVELOPMENT - VIBRA 	Murals and words as an base for cultural and social identity and a seedbed for the movement (knitting of histories past-present-future)	Group, Nature, Spirit - Community leaders are the safeguards of the indigenous roots	Dignity and justice	"Walk asking questions" (Government and organization style)
	International visibility	Group, Nature - Collective decision-making	Women's voices in the Zapatista movement	Shared cooperative agreements (rotation of roles and work)
THINGS - NOUN 	National and international resources to support the communities (land, money, voluntary work)		Respect to their Self, to their collective and to their project	Respect for the agreements and organizations of other collectives
				Shared and clear rules and structure

Agreements map Zapatistas Communities

- ✓ **Murals as a process of cultural and social identity** – In every autonomous community, in every Caracol, the murals speak and breathe in meeting areas. The mural becomes a powerful and inspiring instrument of collective communication that produces a shared vision of the reasons behind this movement. All the murals are beautiful, several were extremely powerful for me, others moved me and others made me so happy they inspired me.

One example is a mural which I think shows their way of connecting with the world. This mural was inside a fourth grade classroom; it covered the whole wall and in one corner there was a



Mural in the 4th grade classroom of an elementary school in Caracol Oventic

small note saying the mural had been painted by the 4th graders of that Caracol with of a group of 4th graders who were visiting from a European country (which I do not recall). The title of this article comes from that mural, “A world where many worlds fit,” a phrase repeated throughout many murals.

We also had the wonderful opportunity of spending time with a group of volunteers who arrived from 12 different countries to help paint a mural for Zapatista teacher Galeano, who was murdered on May 2nd, 2014. Meeting

the “artist in resistance” and having the opportunity of collaborating in the collective mural doing a tiny part helped me understand how relevant these murals are for the movement. It is also their beautiful, vibrant way of honoring those who have fostered this movement for the past 20 years and of keeping their memory alive and in our hearts.

- ✓ **The lively rebellion of words** – “Multiply the seedbed of seedbeds and seek mutual aid,” Subcommander Moises¹. Their way of demonstrating the movement is through words; through their wonderful *corridos* (ballads) and how they play them, through the murals with messages on each one; through their moving and inspiring magazines and public statements that are written with unusual intelligence because they come from the mind connected to the heart. The essence of their messages is dignity, justice and rebellion. As they say, words are their bullets. It is a rebellious art that I believe is well integrated into building something that goes beyond itself, something that permeates other collectives with the power of transformation.
- ✓ **Collective health as a fundamental axis of the community** – Their agreements are very clear regarding health and they are very aware of them. They have created agreements that other communities lack. For example, one of the agreements that stood out to me is that every Zapatista community is alcohol free. This may seem unimportant; however, the Zapatistas realized that alcohol led to violence and family disintegration; the latter is particularly important because families are the source and power of their communities. The women proposed this agreement and the entire collective understood that violence and family disintegration had to change in order for them to shift towards dignity and justice. Therefore, alcohol was banned from all autonomous Zapatista communities. After 20 years, this agreement is still in place. Absolutely EVERYONE respects this important agreement in order

¹ Quotes taken from the the transcription of the Seminar “*El Pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista*”, audios at <http://radiozapatista.org/>

to attain a dignified future in every respect. I think that becoming conscious that this “simple” agreement prevents constant scarcity within the communities is something remarkable.

- ✓ **Clear and shared internal structure with collective decision-making** – There is profound respect for the rules and procedures they have established. In “organizational” terms their procedures are not fully standardized; however, their decision-making process is clear. For example, every Caracol we visited asked us for the same information and the decision process regarding whether or not we were allowed to stay was always the same. A few communities had forms, others wrote down our answers in notebooks, and others asked us to write the information down ourselves. Ultimately, what matters is that our stay was a collective decision made by the Council of Good Government, or *junta de buen gobierno*. They needed all our information; they needed to understand it and to take their time to make sure they made the right decision for the collective and the safety of the visitors. *Caminar preguntando* (to walk asking questions) is one of the agreements.

Another example is how the community diner is organized. Its whole structure is based upon rotation to ensure mutual support. The women who cooked would rotate for breakfast, lunch and dinner in order to distribute the work evenly. Once in a while a woman would arrive to the community diner providing about one kilo of beans for the diner. This happened regularly as a normal part of their cooperative agreements. There was no need to register or supervise individuals, amounts, etc. It all happened very naturally. As one of the Zapatistas told us, their way of organizing communal labor is like sanding and ensuring that everyone ‘sands’ equally.

- ✓ **Civilian safety** – This is another agreement that is worth classifying in a separate category than the others because I believe it may be misunderstood. One may think that the Zapatistas are just reserved. Yes, it would be accurate to say that it is difficult to have them open their doors so one may coexist closely with them. It requires planning with them during the open forums they hold throughout the year or being very persistent (like us).

The health agreement applies to all individuals they coexist with, even though they are not a permanent part of their community. They collect all visitor information, such as names, where they come from, what organizations they belong to, reason of their visit, etc. The Zapatistas strongly value the safety of all individuals within their collective and they ensure the safety of those who dare to live these experiences. “Civilians” are less aware of what all of this implies and it is easy to forget that it is a “war zone”, so their rules protect us from making reckless decisions. We were even present when a civilian broke one of the rules due to ignorance. It was a situation that seemed logical and simple to a civilian, but in a war zone, civilian logic does not rule. The Zapatistas handled the situation by speaking with the group leader and then the whole group, they establish the reasons for and importance of the rule, and the implications of not following it. This was an opportunity for me to realize the significance of this agreement.

- ✓ **Respect the agreements of other collectives** – We witnessed this by spending time with two different groups within the Caracol. The situation mentioned above was caused by volunteers of the muralist commission. In order to solve the issue, the Zapatistas told us several things, and clarified they respected the inner workings of the muralist commission. They mentioned that they did not have to tell the commission how to handle their group, but that it was important to understand the mutual agreements and rules for everyone’s safety. The same thing happened with the Human Rights Commission which we spent time with. It took us a while to understand the coexistence dynamics between these collectives, all of which had very different rules. Spending time with them helped us gain insight on the way Zapatistas interact with other collectives.

- ✓ **International visibility** – This has been a distinct characteristic since the beginning of the movement and I think it is crucial for what they have achieved. There are many international visitors, human rights observers, student and researcher brigades, volunteers from all around the world, etc. From the beginning, the search for visibility was a pillar to strengthen the movement. The pursuit of connecting with individuals beyond their boundaries is evident in many places; a tiny example, several speeches have been translated into English, Dutch, Italian, and French, as well as the mural that was painted in collaboration between Zapatista and international elementary school children. For more information on the movement, the Schools for Chiapas website offers a Zapatista Library with the timeline and documents of the Zapatista Movement translated into almost every language. <http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/2014/04/library-intro/>

A great example of the international network formed by the Zapatistas is the reconstruction of *La Realidad* school and clinic, where Zapatista teacher Galeano was murdered. With national and international support, they gathered money to rebuild 7 schools and clinics. This was also possible as the community volunteered in the construction. They also obtained materials locally and some of them were donated. The money was placed in a fund that will be used to address the needs of the autonomous communities.

- ✓ **The What-About-You? school** – La Escuelita (The Little School) is an initiative that came to life recently and according to what they told me when we spoke, it emerged from the civil society’s request to experience, share and learn with the Zapatistas. Therefore, instead of having adventurers like us knock on their doors as naively as we did, they planned this beautiful possibility during several years.

Here I share a small fragment of what Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos wrote in a tribute to Luis Villoro.

Don Luis (as the Zapatistas called Luis Villoro) told the Subcomandante that they should open a school, and his answer was, “not one, many.” Luis Villoro’s argument following this answer was the exact description of the essence of La Escuelita. I have taken the freedom to include his exact words below:



Zapatista mural – sentence of the book that the woman is holding: “Autonomous education builds different worlds to fit many real worlds with truths”

“No, I don’t mean those schools. Of course, many schools must be opened; there is no doubt about it. I’m talking about a Zapatista school. Not a school that teaches Zapatismo, but a school that demonstrates Zapatismo. Not a school that imposes dogmas, but a school where individuals question, ask, and are forced to think. A school whose motto is: What about you?”

I believe this reflection describes the movement from its beginnings, as Subcomandante Marcos writes in the same tribute, “Our idea was not to teach, nor was it to ‘demonstrate’. It was to provoke the question: What About You? Not with the aim of receiving an answer but to incite reflection.”

Today, La Escuelita is a reality that was planned in La Realidad (how else?). This network for idea pollination is being built and it has enormous potential. The first class of 1,500 national and international activists attended first grade in La Escuelita of “Freedom according to the Zapatistas” (*La Libertad según los Zapatistas*) in December, 2013. Another 1,500 activists attended in January, 2014. They are already planning the next interaction.

- ✓ **Women’s voices in the Zapatista movement** – “...as time passed we lost fear and shame, because now we understand that they [women] have the right to participate in all areas of labor. Then we realized that in order to make a revolution, both men and women are needed,” Female Zapatista.

“Women are already participating in all kind of work, such as health, ultrasounds, laboratory work, pap smears, colposcopy, dentistry, and nursing. As well as in three areas: midwives, bonesetters, and medicinal plants. We are also working in education as formers, coordinators, and educational promoters. We are already working in the Good Government Councils as local authorities and in the compañera business directive.” Female Zapatista.

It is very interesting to observe the balance between men and women in autonomous communities. Unlike other communities around the country, men and women are present in equally lively ways. Men stay in the communities instead of working elsewhere and women take on a fundamental role in building community agreements. As everywhere else in the world, they are still defining what it means being a woman and a man in the current world conditions, however, I believe they have walk farther than others.



*Mural en proceso en el
Caracol La Realidad*

Women are an important axis of the movement. The stories of their bravery send chills down one's spine. For example, there is a mural that expresses how women resisted the soldiers in 1998 with nothing but their bare hands. This mural has also become a symbol of the resistance, showing the permanent struggle against the oppressors.

✓ **Dignity and justice** – These two words are an important banner for the entire movement. The Zapatista system is built on the premise of having every living being in the ecosystem live with dignity and justice. For example, they have an internal bank with very clear rules for those who get sick or are unable to work due to impairment; these individuals can ask for a loan while they are in recovery. Again, every situation is analyzed and the decision is made collaboratively. And perhaps, as my travel partners told me, this is what makes “the children be children, the women be women and the men be men,” their *respect to their identity, to their Self, to their collective and to their project* is deeply grounded in their being. Furthermore, that respect and veneration spread out to Mother Earth and every living being in their community.

All in all, the trip was exactly what I needed to have an experience where I was given clues, notes, experiences, signs, and feelings of this collective. By having the journey culminate in La Realidad (The Reality) opened the door to a fascinating wordplay clearly expressed in the murals: “reality is where dreams are nourished” or “the union between desire and reality possesses revolutionary power.” And so we arrived and lived in La Realidad and that Reality came back with me, breathing within my own reality.

I realized I do not necessarily want to become a Zapatista like Don Luis (or at least not yet), but I do identify with the search for a world where other worlds fit; a world with lively rebellion and the struggle to shape the system. And even though I do not use the word fight because I have never considered what I do as a fight, that's what it may seem in the eyes of others. That is what it is to the Zapatistas: a fight with love, intelligence, dignity, justice, and respect.

Understanding that the path I chose—my trench—with the clarity that it is a loving battle meant to shape the system and to realize that what I seek is the same as what they do, allows me to see it differently. It allows me to take it on with an open heart, seeking to create worlds that seem distant. I think this is important in order to crystallize what these and other communities are spreading all around the world.

And yes, there are many things that need to evolve, there is much to identify regarding the unintended impact of the movement in several places, there are aspects that they must keep

shaping and integrating. Regardless, I dare say that in 20-25 years the Caracoles will be a successful example of a group from the third circle, today they are in the second circle and yet already revolutionizing the way we understand a community of communities. It is a group where abundance is the only rule to follow, where bravery and strength in the clarity of their agreements—as well as their relation to ecosystems that still related with others from scarcity—are what make up a collective that can teach a great deal in very humane ways.

The next step is sharing and learning about organizations, visions and agreements in other groups; as well as realizing that even though we may come from seemingly different trenches, such as companies and organizations, mutual realities are less different than we think. I believe that they will be an important part of this process of identifying our similarities and that by then many other collectives will have followed.

Quotes taken from the transcription of the Seminar *“El Pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista”*, audios at <http://radiozapatista.org/>