

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Mexico's Mixe Indians organize an adult education system that suits their needs and their lifestyle, and better arms them to defend their rights and culture.

To begin always with the practical or what people do, know, live and feel, the different situations they confront, and then add to it." This is the cornerstone of a wide-ranging programming aimed at bringing Mexico's Mixe Indians out of their cultural and economic isolation, explains Sofia Robles Hernandez, the secretary-general of the Services for the Mixe Community (SER), a non-governmental organization.

There are more than 91,000 people living in the Mixe region in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca. This rugged, isolated zone comprises 140 communities, but only 45% of them are accessible by road. Illiteracy is high, child malnutrition common and economic opportunity almost non-existent.

The physical difficulties of the region and the subsistence lifestyle of its inhabitants make any change to the situation difficult. However SER is trying hard. For almost two decades now it has been developing programmes aimed at raising the educational levels of the Mixe adults. These cover a range of activities, from increasing agricultural production and improving the situation for Mixe women, to communication and broadcasting.

However, these activities are all tailored to the rhythm of community life and take a top-down-bottom-up approach: the communities are involved every step of the way. They decide what they need to know, how it can be taught and how quickly.

ALTOGETHER

"We have basically adapted strategies that meet the survival needs of the Mixe population," says Robles. For example, she explains, adults do not have as much time as children, and they do not necessarily need to read or write, so the focus is on encouraging discussion and analysis of common problems and searching for realistic alternatives possible for themselves or negotiable with the country's institutions. This is done through what Robles calls "community assemblies or forums", the SER programme's main educational tool.

"The advantage of the assembly/forums is that everyone can have an opinion whether or not they can read or write. Nonetheless they are exposed to literacy

because the assembly incorporates exercises using written letters or drawings. In this way we can systematize information with the support of the community animators," explains Robles.

Through the assemblies, SER launched a series of "Weeks of Mixe Life and Language" which essentially aim to promote the reading and writing of Mixe. This is one of the most remarkable of SER's undertakings, and one of the pillars of its entire programme. Although professional linguists have lent their expertise, work on

we are defending its social character, its preparation, as much as its use."

Mathematics are also incorporated in these gatherings, along with Mixe culture. "In each community in which the week unfolds, we ask elderly men and women to share the history of the community or a regional legend they may know."

Holding the "Weeks" in different communities at different times permits more people to participate, says Robles, "and to provide better service, groups of beginners, intermediates and advanced are organized. In a few weeks, the advanced participants can be teachers to the beginners."

DEFENDING THEIR RIGHTS

Training has also been given in legal affairs to ensure that these marginalized people can defend themselves. The assemblies "reflected in their own language on the contents of the Communal Statute which is fundamental for us to ensure protection of our communal lands", says Robles. "We have given much importance to this type of training because we think that the information provided by the press and radio does not reach our community, or if it arrives is not completely understood. Many communities are still alienated from what happens on the national level. Thus the importance of analysing, comparing and proposing, beginning with the knowledge of the message."

In the assembly/workshop/classes proposed for the current phase of the SER programme (continuing through to July 1998) themes will cover the fundamental rights of indigenous populations including community, culture, free will, land and territory, and indigenous law. Anthropological, literary and linguistic subjects are also planned.

"We are conscious that we are not training people to supply the institutions. Rather we are aiming to train critical and creative people who at all times and in community spaces can reflect on the problems they must confront."

S.W. with
Victor RUIZ ARRAZOLA
in Oaxaca



WHO WILL DO THE COOKING AND CLEANING IF SHE TAKES TIME OFF TO ATTEND CLASSES? (Photo © I. SELSER).

developing a Mixe alphabet has been done essentially by the people themselves. Although the process is long and difficult, partly because the Mixe language has several variants, a number of alphabets have been proposed and worked on.

"We have not been able to achieve a unified alphabet," says Robles, "but we firmly believe that practice will lead us to decide which (alphabet) is the one that should be adopted. We take into account that everything is a process. It is necessary to continue discussing our graphic system in our language and to submit it to the judgement of our communities. In this way,