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Learning participation for a human development approach

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Introduction

This paper presents reflections on an experience of university-society engagement in rural areas of Chiapas State in South Mexico. This area is characterised by problems such as poverty, ecological degradation, and social conflicts. In recent years, the Zapatistas social movement has questioned the political and social situation. Around this movement, different social actors have established an agenda that includes: demands for important political changes; cultivation of new relations between government and the indigenous population at the national level; accomplishment of collective human rights (territory, language, culture); 'peace with dignity'; and institutional changes and recognition of new participatory local government. Within this context, different approaches to local participation, political action, and social organisation have been developed, combining traditional with new solutions to complex problems. Some of the most important actions developed are around health, education, sustainable production, and respect for human rights.

The Interdisciplinary Research Programme on Human Development

The Interdisciplinary Research Programme on Human Development¹ was launched in 1995 by the Universidad

Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM). The programme offers professional and postgraduate qualifications, as well as a diploma for practitioners and local leaders. We also work with undergraduate students.

By a 'human development' approach, we mean work oriented towards guaranteeing human rights to the whole population. Our work is developed around what we call the human development axes, which are:

- health, nutrition, and life quality;
- technology, production, and environment;
- culture, processes of learning, and human rights; and
- social strategies, public policies, and power relations.

This work is carried out in different regions, in interaction with civil society groups such as cooperatives and NGOs, and/or governmental institutions who are already working on initiatives with a human development perspective, and who have some interest in collaborating with our research programme.

An important dimension of our work is the participation of teachers, students, and graduates from different areas (social sciences, biological sciences, industrial and graphic design). Under Mexican law, at the end of their studies, all university students must undertake what is called 'social service'. This entails working for six months to one year using their professional knowledge in activities oriented

¹ Programa de Investigación Interdisciplinario Desarrollo humano en Chiapas

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towards social benefits. During the last three years, almost 300 students from 16 specialities have conducted their social service through our research programme. Around half work directly in Chiapas and the others work partly there and partly at the university.

The programme collaborates with communities, cooperative organisations, and NGOs to try to link research with practical service and active learning. We understand participation as a route to establishing and maintaining collaboration with social groups, to understanding and helping to identify new solutions to their problems, and to enlarging their horizons. Service takes place via actions developed by our students at community or regional level around different problems (health, production, sustainability).

How can we help our students to learn participation? Most of them decide to work in the programme because they have political sympathies with regional social groups. They want to do something for the population but don't know how. One of our most important challenges is enabling these students to recognise the population as a people with priorities and capabilities, and to base their work on this.

Working with local organisations and communities

Within the programme, we have developed the following strategies:

- Identifying the priorities of different social groups in the short, medium, and long term.
- Defining those priorities around which we can collaborate through a sustainable human development perspective, according to our capacities and resources.
- Developing an intercultural approach, in particular the interaction between different kinds of knowledge – ‘popular’ and ‘scientific’. This means being open to changes in our research priorities, our questions, and our objectives;
- Developing an interdisciplinary approach, involving social sciences, biological sciences, industrial and graphic design, etc.
- Recognising, and, if possible, adapting the work to the existence of different rhythms and time perspectives in

local organisations and the university.

A fundamental question is how to establish strong relations with these local groups? We try to establish a ‘positive circle’ by drawing on previous relationships with people working with local and regional organisations or with NGOs. Some of them are our own graduates, whose work in the regions gives us a better understanding of the social priorities, and helps us to identify collaboration possibilities. These relationships are very important for new students. The graduates act as intellectual guides, who can provide political understanding of regional situations and even access to infrastructure, something that our institution lacks, and which helps to sustain our continuing work at the local and regional level. This relationship between local organisations, the NGOs, and UAM is the basis for identifying different collaboration possibilities for our students.

Creating a space for people from local organisations

Another question is how to establish medium- and long-term perspectives in relationships with social groups? To achieve this, it is fundamentally important to create a space where people from local organisations can express their priorities and reflect upon what they are doing, what they want to do, and what kind of collaborations would be desirable and appropriate for their technical, economical, social, cultural, and political conditions. The University diploma is one of the initiatives that have been undertaken to establish this space.

The diploma in ‘Sustainable Human Development’ is aimed at different kinds of popular leader and local practitioners. The majority of these are proposed by their communities, other social organisations, e.g. cooperatives, and NGOs. Between 15 and 30 students are taken at any one time, around a third of whom are women. The diploma has six monthly sessions where students learn analysis skills and conduct analytical exercises on their own problems.

Throughout the diploma, the approach is to help participants define their own ‘human development strategies’. In every session we have a theme, for example, values, traditions, and culture; our environment and how we use it; public policies and their effects; our priorities and our rights; or our strategy for sustainable human development. In the interval between the diploma sessions, participants must reproduce this analysis with their own local or regional groups (peasants, woman, students, etc.) through collective work, with the results being presented at the following diploma session.

Not every participant will consider all the human development dimensions in the proposals that they identify

during the diploma, neither will they define actions around all of the axes that we consider. However, the approach enables each problem (around health, sustainable production, the situation of women etc.) or development action (from small projects to medium-term programmes) to be understood from a medium- to long-term perspective, from which alternatives can be identified.

The objectives are to facilitate reflection on a more complex perspective of the future, and to identify possible collaborations. At the end of the diploma, the participants reflect on their own human development strategies, and at least in some cases we have a common agenda on local and regional priorities and have identified some possible collaborative actions with the participation of our students.

This space is not just educative for the formal diploma students. It is also a space where our undergraduate students, who are working in the programme, can learn about the general situation, problems, priorities, and experiences of the diploma students and the constituencies they represent. Students from different subject areas can use this space to try to identify possible collaboration according to their own capacities. We encourage students to define their own activities, in interaction with local practitioners. These can be individual or collective initiatives developed over a period of six months to one year.

We also hold seminars for our students, with graduates and teachers. In these, we reflect upon the general socio-economic, political, and cultural situation in Chiapas, enabling the undergraduates to better understand the context of their work.

Some examples of learning participation

Social health systems

One of the key priorities for people in Chiapas is health. Some of our medicine, nursery, and dentist students work in health at the regional level. However, the objective here is not just to give medical assistance to people who have health problems, but also to develop local health systems. Local participation is highly important in providing an adequate response to regional conditions.

One of the region's characteristics is that people live in small towns (less than 1,000 inhabitants), most of them very isolated and without good communications. For several years an extremely important focus for our work has been building the capacity of local health practitioners, who are able to devote their attention to the local community. Health practitioners all belong to a clinic, where there is a medical doctor, a nurse, and, where possible, a dentist. The health

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practitioners help to translate the patients' explanations to the medical doctors. With this approach, a health team can cover several thousand people. This kind of health work is the origin of our research programme, and it is fundamental to the human development approach. It was the first area in which a diploma was used to help in practitioner development formation.

Agro-ecological production

Rural populations have been adversely affected by the globalisation process, specifically by falling prices for their products. There is a vicious cycle of low production and productivity, low prices, and increasing poverty. Priorities for many social organisations focus around environmental problems and the degradation of natural resources, and developing agro-ecological solutions. As part of this effort our students have been collaborating with local practitioners to develop capacities and to achieve better agro-ecological production. Efforts are focused both on domestic production (of maize and beans) and commercial production (principally of coffee). In this latter case the agro-ecological approach is related to the development of alternatives which feed, for example, into the organic or fair trade markets. The complex process involves our students in the intricate realities of globalisation.

Designing appropriate technology

Design is the area least acknowledged as capable of providing solutions for poor people's needs. However, we regard it as an important area. In our interaction with different actors, a lot of problems are recognised as having a technological dimension. Several students have been working with local organisations and NGOs to develop small-scale technologies around production problems, handicrafts, and health problems, etc. For example, in coordination with a health NGO, a group of students worked on the design of a cheap and simple aid that enabled children with muscular problems living in isolated areas to achieve better mobility.

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Some challenges in learning participation

The participation learning process faces a number of challenges:

- The academic timetable. Students have to report their findings to the university at the end of the academic period; however, students' activities with different social groups are often still pending and therefore their results are incomplete.
- Cultural differences and cultural diversity. The challenge is to create an intercultural dialogue, e.g. between the agro-ecological technical approach and peasants' empirical knowledge.
- The relationship between different disciplinary approaches, e.g. natural sciences and social sciences, including differences in defining problems, solutions, and alternatives.
- The relationship between research, service, and action, and the learning process.
- Problems arising from the complex political situation and from social actions geared to transforming power relations from the local to the national level.

Conclusions

Our university work in Chiapas began 20 years ago with a health programme that developed a novel approach to bridging theory and practice. We learned a lot from this experience in which students chose to conduct their social service by developing their professional practice around community health. They and their work have been fundamental in the next phases of our initiative.

The Zapatistas movement launched in 1994 obliged us to revise what we were doing and how we were doing it. In 1995 a new approach was proposed, and our research

programme on human development was launched in Chiapas, attracting high levels of interest from students and teachers and important support from our university community. However, our commitment to working with the population, many of whom are in opposition to the Government, has meant that we have been under increasing pressure from the Government to withdraw from Chiapas.

In 2000, there were important political changes both at the national and at the Chiapas state level. For the first time in decades, opposition parties won both the presidential and the Chiapas government elections. When the new governments came to power there was hope of a political solution to the indigenous Zapatistas' demands. But, three years on, these expectations have not been fulfilled, negotiations are suspended, and the social situation is very difficult. The Zapatistas decided to maintain resistance, which means that they do not receive any kind of governmental programmes while their demands for changes are not accomplished. Nevertheless, some changes have occurred and in this new phase we have continued with our work.

In this situation, just maintaining our research-service-action work is a very significant achievement. It develops a new learning experience that relates our students to this complex situation and opens them up to the possibility of collaborating with regional social actors in the search for alternatives. That some of these students have decided to stay on there to continue these engagements is both an important result and a key basis for strengthening our work for the future.

We recognise that the needs are great, while the human and material resources are small. Likewise, a lot of work is necessary to achieve the profound social, economical, political, and cultural changes that are needed. Nonetheless, this experience has been very important, and we are very proud of our students, of their open minds, and of their capacity to learn. We have a lot to learn from them and from local practitioners. The main lesson is that, even in this complex situation, human development is a possibility and learning participation is a necessary condition for its achievement.

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