

# Natural common resources management in indigenous territories in Mexico and Paraguay

Claudio Basabe<sup>1</sup>  
Yolanda Massieu<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

This paper exposes research results about indigenous territories in two Latinamerican countries, both with common natural resources managed by human local groups. We depart from these resources' management as a common in a sustainable way, rather than being exploited in a disordered manner and eventually destroyed. Comparative research aims to reflect about tensions to use and conserve commons natural resources based in collective actions, and how internal pressures about this are managed.

In Paraguay we consider yshir communities' experience in swamps' region, where these people preserve their resources through activities such as fishing and crafts' production, and their political organization concerning their territory's defense. There are tensions because of agribusiness and environmental services' payment confronting yshir's way of life.

In Mexican case we present research results in Oaxaca Sierra Norte, a region identified with sustainable forestry since the eighties. There are local organizations who practice what is called "comunalidad"<sup>3</sup> in Oaxaca, meaning a very antique way of taking collective actions and decisions concerning life aspect, including common natural resources, like their woods. This decision making way has allowed these zapoteca communities to manage their woods receiving income from wood production. We specify in Santa Maria Yavesia, a Sierra Norte community where

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<sup>1</sup> Independent researcher, Master Degree in Rural Development, Paraguay, [cbasabe@gmail.com](mailto:cbasabe@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Teacher-researcher, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico, [yola\\_massieu@hotmail.com](mailto:yola_massieu@hotmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Comunalidad is a concept born in Oaxaca, it explains the community way in which indigenous people of this region take collective actions and decisions. It considers community common natural resources management, but also a very aspects of daily life. It is represented by "comunal flower", a round image containing knowledge, beliefs and cosmovision in its outside circle and another life aspects such as language, education, tradition, rules, values, community laws, work, territory, celebration and political power (Nava, 2018). Maize plant is frequently represented in the flower center.

we have made some recent field work concerning *comunalidad* as common natural resources management.

Ostrom (1990) and commons approach consider cultural differentiation concerning commons government based in institutional arrangements created by local social actors in specific socio-historic contexts, we can analyze two different Latinamerican indigenous experiences following this approach. At the same time, we seek to find similarities with *comunalidad* concept, as a way of living, deciding and acting of native groups in Latin America.

As we live nowadays an environmental world crises which is leading both humanity and our planet to destruction, we consider that studying and understanding these kind of experiences can show us ways to solve ecological damage and save ourselves and nature.

In both cases, Mexico and Paraguay, we can characterize Latinamerican indigenous communities, following Mexican *comunalidad* author Floriberto Díaz, as having five elements: 1. A territorial space, defined by collective possession; 2. A common history, orally transmitted; 3. A local language identified as common; 4. Political, culture, social, civil, economics and religious aspects defined by organization; 5. A justice own system (Robles y Cardoso, 2007).

### **Comunalidad in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte**

Comunalidad is an indigenous Mexican concept born in last seventies, proposed mainly by two indigenous anthropologists from Oaxaca Sierra Norte: Jaime Martínez Luna (zapotec) and Floriberto Díaz (mixe). Although both their thoughts refer to an ethno-political approach, they emphasize different aspects of collective action and decisions: in Martínez Luna case he thinks more about celebration (fiesta, sharing) and in Díaz we find more importance about territory. Nevertheless, "comunalidad of sociopolitical reality of communities has a complete validity as an equal with other theories about the world" (Nava, 2018). It is also produced by resistance to colonial dispossession of colonial territories, "comunalidad, that is our way of thinking, has its origin in dispossession history" (Martínez Luna, 2010). This means we face a consequence of conquest and colonization, embedded in

ancestral knowledge of native people. As Oaxaca people migrate since many decades ago to Mexico's cities and USA, *comunalidad* also travels with them, and in their new homes they reproduce collective actions such as *fiesta*, community work (*tequio*) and mutual help, as it happens in *Yavesía*. This way, people from *Sierra Norte* live their lives and territory with rules and a sense of belonging, using a hierarchical positions system based in responsibility and learning, doing well in these positions means prestige, trust and reciprocity (Guerrero, 2015).

According to Floriberto Díaz, we find the following elements of *comunalidad* as a theoretical category: 1. Earth as mother and territory; 2. Consensus in assembly for decision making; 3. Gratuitous service as a way of exercising authority; 4. Collective work as a way of recreation; and 5. Rituals and ceremonies as an expression of communal gift (Robles and Cardoso, 2007).

As the aim of this paper is to clarify how indigenous people in two Latinamerican countries are able to manage their natural resources as a common in a sustainable way due to their own way of collective action, we emphasize in Díaz thinking earth and territory status: "Earth is for us a Mother, who feeds us and shelter us in her bowels" (Robles and Cardoso, 2007). As it is in a mother-children relationship, there are no property terms, but mutual ownership. In this way, *mixe* people understand God as creator of life by comprehension of all living creatures. Once we have explained briefly about *comunalidad*, we describe this issue in *Santa María Yavesía*.

### **Santa María Yavesía and its common natural resources management**

*Santa María Yavesía* community, has a different proposal concerning their woods in relation with other *Sierra Norte* communities, who are involved in sustainable forestry. Here it is important to mention that these communities have a long story of political struggle to recover their forests from private dispossession by *Papelera Tuxtepec* company, who deforested large areas during 50s to 70s last century's period. It was in late seventies and eighties that all these movements succeeded and now many *Sierra Norte* communities manage their wood extraction in collective associations in a sustainable way (Chapela, 2007).

In contrast, now Yavesía's proposal consists in a natural protected area instead of exploiting wood. The community has got 9,000 forest hectares, with pine tree and oaks, and an important water amount due to this surface's conservation. As many of Sierra Norte's communities, there is a strong migration to Oaxaca City, Mexico City and Unites States of America. These outside groups are also organized following comunalidad principles and participate in local Yavesía's decisions. Collective decision of no wood exploitation generated some conflicts, as local tourism, which could be an alternative for having income from the forest, has not developed enough to create employments for locals. This an important concern of external groups, who had to migrate because of lack of surviving options. As preserved forest does not give enough money to the community, there is pressure to exploit it and illegal wood extraction is frequent.

Besides, there are long data conflicts with two neighbour communities: Latachao and Amatlán. Yavesía's locals say that these two communities have destroyed their forests due to over exploitation and now are the ones who extract illegal wood, but there are doubts about it. These three communities have a legal status as "pueblos mancomunados"<sup>4</sup>, meaning that their territory should be managed as a whole with consensus. This has not been possible and Yavesía is trying since some decades ago to be independent, not belonging to "pueblos mancomunados".

Santa María Yavesía is also a municipality with the same name, it is 1977 meters from sea level and has 440 inhabitants, 198 men and 242 women, only 9.09% is form outside Oaxaca, 3.18% is illiterate and has an education average degree of 6.58 years. 52.2% of total population is indigenous and 27.5% speak indigenous language, all of them speak Spanish also. 44.77% of elder 12 years population is occupied, there are 225 houses, 100% of them with electricity, 97.06% potable water, only 10.29% has a cel phone and 1.47% internet (Pueblos de América, n/d). Yavesía is known as one of the few municipalities in Mexico where public funds are used for the town benefit. This way municipality's authorities achieve to receive an

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<sup>4</sup>Community linked towns, there is no precise English translation. Mancomunados towns in Sierra Norte are Santa María Yavesía, Santa Catarina Lachatao, Nevería, San Isidro Llano Grande, San Miguel Amatlán, San Antonio Cuajimoloyas, Santa Martha Latuvi and Benito Juárez

increase of federal funds of \$100,000.00 pesos (\$5,000.00 usd) every year. They are also known to be one of the cleanest small towns in Mexico.

They follow comunalidad principles, their authorities are elected in assembly and exercise their position for three years, without income. This way they exercise a community service and expressed during field work in November 2018 that their payment is prestige, and when they die they will have the privilege of being buried in municipal cemetery and music in the ceremony, as well as being remembered as a good leader in the community.

Paradoxically, their decision about not exploiting their forest and trying to go out from “pueblos mancomunados” has generated them conflicts with their neighbours and has been an obstacle to their own projects. Even more, a few decades ago, in the eighties, they allowed violent groups to interfere in community’s actions and Oaxaca’s government had to intervene. This way, they haven’t reach practical agreements to manage tourism in their forest in a collective way, and have not been able to stop illegal wood extraction.

Nevertheless, external communities are active in local collective actions, such as repairing their church that was damaged due to 2017 earthquake, and are optimistic concerning educational and touristic projects in the future. A problem we detected during field work is that external communities are in an inferior status concerning community’s decisions, although they bring funds.

Having described main elements of common natural resources management in Yavesía, now we approach yshir community in Chaco, Paraguay.

### **Ishyr people in Chaco, Paraguay**

In the extreme north of the country is located the Chaco Department of the Alto Paraguay where the Yshiro Ybytosos and Tomaraho live. This ethnic group lives in populations that are settled in the districts of Bahía Negra and Fuerte Olimpo. However, this work refers only to the Sub-group Yshiro Ybytosos, who resides within the boundaries of the District of Bahía Negra and comprising the communities of port Diana, Puerto Pollo, port 14 may or Karcha Bahlut and port hope. These population centers are located to the East of the district on the right bank of the

Paraguay River. Bahia Negra district has an area of 35,057 km<sup>2</sup>, where the Yshiro are titled 42,675 hectares as community properties where the mentioned towns sit. In addition, the Union of indigenous communities of the Yshiro nation (Uciny) handled in collective administration with the NGO Guyra Paraguay another property of 4,745 ha, called Tobich.

Yshiro's territory is inscribed within the ecoregion of the Paraguayan Swamp, which, in turn, is part of the wetland system in the world known as the Pantanal or Gran Pantanal, which covers areas of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay and is considered one of the ecosystems rich in biodiversity of flora and wildlife. The ecoregion of the Paraguayan Pantanal is located in the East of the country, on the coast of the Paraguay River and North of the near Concepción town of Itapucumi and covers a total area of 42,023.10 km<sup>2</sup> (Mereles *et al*, 2015).

The Paraguayan Pantanal is part of a series of wetlands covering approximately 17% of the national territory with lagoons, lakes, estuaries, rivers, streams, and stagnant water that appear and disappear regularly. These biodiversity-rich areas are abundant birds, plants adapted to the water, and a large number of organisms, small fish, snails, crabs etc. The wetlands of the Paraguay River and its tributaries also depend on both migratory birds as the native that use resources of wetlands to breed, rest, feeding, and in some cases, continue your route of travel. These natural resources are also an important role in the subsistence economy of local groups that are dedicated to hunting and fishing (Borsato and Vera, 2016).

This ecoregion Yshiro communities based their material reproduction on an economy of subsistence characterized by pluriactivity. Fishing, honey collection, the production of handicrafts, hunting, stand in occupational diversification casually known as "changa", and considers peonage stays, productive activities of backyard as pigs and chickens breeding, and implementation of small gardens as well as any temporary or permanent migration to various urban parts of the country. To a lesser extent are small scale cattle and agriculture. A minority of professionals, who are concentrated in the public sector and a large majority of people who are beneficiaries of the programs of social assistance, allowances or pension from the State, as Tekoporâ, older adults living in poverty program and the Programme of

assistance to fishermen, complement the spectrum of activities that generate income to the family units or products Yshiro. In this range are also small stores, dining family establishments, construction of batelones, provision of transportation or local freight services, masonry, among others.

With some caveats, in general the Yshiro of Bahia Negra district communities access without major inconveniences to natural resources of their titled land and insure and largely base their subsistence economy in such access. These economic activities of subsistence of the Yshiro people have very little negative impact in their natural surroundings and allowed to conserve natural resources thanks to a production and/or sustainable harvesting in some way.

There is a tacit understanding among the population that each one of them has the right of access to the lands of their community for the use of its resources. For certain activities such as subsistence hunting, harvesting honey for consumption or for the preparation of palm leaves handicrafts, the access is free. This means that any person who is a member of the community can carry out these activities without many restrictions. Now, for other activities such as extraction of wood for the construction of houses, or a "picket" fencing or pasture for livestock feeding cattle, activities of larger in relation to the access and use of resources, are done through an agreement between the leader and the people interested (Community authority recognized locally and by State) in turn, who is access to resources which authorized or not. In this way, collective decisions and actions express also comunalidad as was described for Mexican case.

In cases where access to natural resources by internal or external groups could benefit or harm to the community, the leader or the community raises the question in their respective community assemblies. Sometimes achieve consensus and others the question leads to dilated conflicts that may eventually lead to changes of leaders and even the involvement of external institutions to try to solve the problem. A similar situation as the one described for Yavesía's case concerning their forest and belonging to "pueblos mancomunados".

This is important to point out that Yshiro as a whole have traditional access to resources, and that this traditional access has the imprint of a sustainable use. You

can however see inside less sustainable ways to access resources, such as excessive extraction of quebracho and palo santo wood for train tracks building, or deforestation of almost 2 thousand hectares in the lands of Port Esperanza. These forms of access are related with the incorporation of external agents to the exploitation of natural resources, or to those who have access to the properties and take advantage of natural resources are people or groups outside the community. Here the role of the local actors is restricted to managing agreements that could generate collective or personal benefits without interfering directly in the exploitation and consumption of natural resources.

The sustainable use of the natural resources that made the Yshiro has been limited in recent decades by the advance of agribusiness in the Paraguayan Chaco region; above all of the ranches that are enclosing communities within the titled land, preventing them from accessing their ancestral territory. This breakthrough has given much to talk about how nationally and internationally and has placed the Paraguayan Chaco as the most deforested area in the world in recent years. In this context, the role of the UCINY, who heads the struggle and the territorial claim of the Yshiro nation is important. Bahía Negra district main territorial demand of the group in question is about property of Puerto Ramos or Eshma and Puerto Pollo. Both properties are part of the ancestral territory of the Yshiro and one is currently under the ownership of the Paraverde S.R.L. company, Turkish, belonging to Mostaf Arpacı, livestock entrepreneur, and the other under the ownership of the livestock of Brazilian origin João Vieira de Medeiros Neto. These properties had historically been part of the Yshiro territory and until a few years ago, access to these areas was carried out without major inconveniences. Where the Yshiro regain these lands, you would unify the territory on the shores of the Paraguay River and thus maintain a series of titled property of the Yshiro nation in turn connected way. This would strengthen sustainable use and living forms that perform the Yshiro on the banks of the Paraguay River.

Finally, it is important to emphasize on the one hand that the Yshiro people subsistence economic activities have very little negative impact in their natural environment and to conserve natural resources thanks to a production in any way



and/or sustainable harvesting. On the other hand, that the notion of property which prevails among the Yshiro has less to do with the idea of exclusivity of private assets than with the fact of a collective, relatively inclusive, and also sustainable access. This means, they are ruled by comunalidad notion. In a context of climate change, warming, global and massive deforestation of the Paraguayan Chaco, these forms of life and relationship with nature are to be recognized or at least visualized.

### **Final reflections**

We consider that the two briefly exposed experiences give elements to confirm that indigenous Latin American people are capable of managing their common natural resources by collective action in a sustainable way. They achieve this inspired in their traditions and antique concepts, such as comunalidad, but in a modern way adapted to our times.

Nevertheless, we can't ignore external threats to this management and institutions, as well as internal tensions and conflicts. To endure these problems, again we have ancestral knowledge and collective action practices present in these groups.

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