

Reclaiming barren lands, promoting sustainable agriculture with indigenous knowledge.

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- [Commons Strategies](#)
- [Food and Agriculture](#)
- [indigenous knowledge](#)
- [International](#)
- [Mexico](#)
- [sustainable agriculture](#)

Name:

Jesús León Santos

Mexico's food supply is undergoing a dramatic transformation as 40 percent of the nation's corn—a staple at dinner tables—is now imported from the U.S. The Mexican government meanwhile is pursuing agricultural policies designed to discourage small farmers in favor of large, industrialized operations. This holds huge repercussions for the environmental and economic balance of North America.

According to Octavio Rosas Landa—an activist, economist and professor in Mexico City—current policies will drive 22 million of Mexico's 25 million peasants (40 percent who are indigenous people) off the land in the next few years, pushing most of them unwillingly to Mexican cities and the U.S.

As they depart the countryside, families who have farmed their land for centuries will take away local commons knowledge that could help Mexico solve its agriculture and environmental challenges.

You get a sense of what is being lost in Oaxaca province, where Jesús León Santos, a 42-year-old small farmer of Mixteca Indian heritage, is leading efforts to transform barren landscapes into green fields and forests. His secret: reviving traditional Mixteca farming methods to restore local ecosystems.

Working with an organization he founded called CEDICAM (in English, the Center for Integral Small Farmer Development in the Mixteca), Leon is fighting rampant erosion in the region (a UN study found 83 percent of the region severely eroded) by reintroducing trees, rainwater collection practices, contour drainage ditches and centuries-old stone terraces on hillside plots.

CEDICAM has worked with more than 1500 small farmers, who have planted more than one million trees over 1000 hectares (approx. 2500 acres) and reclaimed 2000 acres of farmland. The trees help retain rainwater, which can be used to revive unproductive fields.

Leon encourages farmers to use organic compost instead of chemical fertilizer, which has doubled in price over the last year. He teaches them to plant crops in traditional milpa—small plots where corn, beans and squash are planted together, an indigenous practice that returns nutrients to the soil and provides a natural defense against pests. He also counsels farming with oxen rather than tractors, which compacts the soil making it impermeable to rainfall.

These traditional agricultural methods have a new currency today as small farmers struggle with the rocketing cost of artificial fertilizer, pesticides, machinery and gasoline. “The Green Revolution displaced our local resources,” he told the New York Times, referring to the catchy phrase once used to describe chemical, industrialized agriculture. “Our dependence on the outside—that led to our ruin.”

But Leon’s work blazes a new path for small farmers, who can draw on the wealth of the commons to reinvent farming for the future. In April, Jesus Leon Santos was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental prize, representing North America as one of seven recipients around the world honored for their heroic and imaginative grassroots activism.

For more information on Jesus Leon Santos and CEDICAM see the [Goldman Prize](#) and [New York Times](#).