

Putting Large-Scale Infrastructure Projects First: The COVID-19 Pandemic in Indigenous Mexico

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This article argues that whilst indigenous people are central to the Mexican president's official developmentalist discourse of bringing prosperity to the country's marginalised and poor, their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic have not been met and their interests have been sidelined. Whilst experiencing serious loss of trading revenue, negative impacts of misinformation, and lack of access to appropriate healthcare, indigenous Mexicans also faced the aggressive advance on their territories of large-scale infrastructure projects, which have become the backbone of the president's strategy for countering the economic recession caused by the pandemic. The discontinuation of relevant legal means to challenge the advance of the megaprojects during the pandemic effectively threatened indigenous people's democratic rights to protect their land, identities and way of life.

Keywords: COVID-19, indigenous people, infrastructure, megaprojects, Mexico, territory.

For those of us living in southern Mexico until March this year, the pandemic felt like a slowly approaching tsunami. In the final days of February, the Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case (Infobae, 2020). The Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) continued nonetheless to tour the country and appear before hundreds of people. In March, he made a public plea for people to support family economies and the informal sector – the backbone of the survival strategies of many urban poor and indigenous people – by continuing to ‘eat out’ (El Universal, 2020). The federal government soon received criticism for maintaining such a relaxed attitude towards the pandemic, and for not taking immediate rigorous action to mitigate the spread of the disease and protect the population. Just a few days earlier, the under secretary of the Ministry of Health, Hugo López-Gatell Ramírez, had announced the beginning of the *Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia*, a series of measures including: voluntary confinement; suspension of non-essential activities; working from home where possible; suspension of events with more than 5000 people; and the shielding of people over 60 years old. The health minister's forceful *Quédate en casa* (stay at home) appeal accompanying the daily COVID-19 press conference left Mexico's myriad informal workers, urban poor, day labourers and indigenous communities to face an insuperable predicament.

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COVID-19 and Indigenous Communities

Considering home-based quarantine and social distancing unworkable, indigenous communities all over Mexico quickly began to seal off their villages and install sanitary checkpoints to prevent the spread of coronavirus among their population (Camas, 2020; Cancino, 2020; Martínez Elorriaga, 2020). Right from the beginning of the pandemic, indigenous community organisations had drawn attention to the potentially severe impact of COVID-19 in their territories, given the systemic lack of sanitary facilities and equipment, hospitals, health workers and medicines.

Federal and state governments delayed producing and disseminating information about the virus and related sanitary measures in indigenous languages, for instance via radio programmes or podcasts that could be shared on social media, as indigenous communities have members who cannot read (García, 2020). In consequence, Zoque indigenous communities from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec came forward in mid-July to ask for help regarding 'unexplained deaths' among their elderly (López, 2020). In addition, the unchallenged spread of disinformation – the idea that coronavirus was a government hoax and instrument of repression – resulted in widespread ignorance about the need for social distancing, hygiene measures and use of face coverings in the first four months of the pandemic (Mandujano, 2020).

Whilst the Mexican government did not impose a strict lockdown, it provided few concrete instructions as to how people reliant on money from daily trading could manage and survive this health crisis. In a Facebook video conference organised by the Red Universitaria Anticapitalista (RUA) in May, Binni'zaa activist and member of the Asamblea de Pueblos del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio, Bettina Cruz, complained, 'They put us in quarantine, the [indigenous] peoples, the people who live from day to day. They do not quarantine the big firms, which are still open: Elektra, Coppel, Walmart are open here in Juchitán. All of them' (Red Universitaria Anticapitalista, 2020). Independent market traders and their suppliers, family businesses and indigenous farmers have suffered disproportionately from the implementation of COVID-related sanitary measures. Rather than supporting traders in establishing safe sanitary procedures, many state governments resorted to closing markets and fairs as an easy way to reduce the spread of the disease (Nieto, 2020). In addition to bringing much of public life, market production and informal trading to a halt, the pandemic also reactivated and reinforced a range of long-standing environmental and socio-territorial conflicts.

Megaprojects as National Priority

Extractive endeavours, such as deforestation, fracking and mining, and the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects continued without hindrance during the pandemic. Among AMLO's most ambitious infrastructure projects are the so-called 'Tren Maya', a high-speed intercity railway across the Yucatán peninsula, mainly for international tourists, and the 'Corredor Interoceánico Istmo de Tehuantepec', a multimodal transport connection linking the Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean to enable faster international trade and to exploit Mexico's geostrategic position. Central to AMLO's promotion of these megaprojects has been the idea that they will bring development and progress to Mexico's historically disadvantaged southern states, and thereby deliver prosperity to the local indigenous population. AMLO vigorously defended the prioritisation of these infrastructure projects during the pandemic against objections from civil society groups,

arguing that they will 'reactivate the economy' and 'have a multiplier effect' allowing Mexico to overcome the negative impacts of the health crisis (Entrelíneas, 2020).

According to UNAM student activist Diego Luz, facilitating the RUA online event, 'The megaprojects and other policies that devastate the territory and promote dispossession continue to be at the forefront of the current government's policies [...] in spite of the state of the pandemic in which we find ourselves, despite the fact that society at the moment needs more health and care provision. We have seen that in the case of the mis-named Tren Maya, which has not stopped' (Red Universitaria Anticapitalista, 2020). At this same event, Violeta Núñez, a researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, spoke of expectations that these infrastructural megaprojects would help Mexico confront the upcoming economic recession, but warned against inflated hopes. The Tren Maya, for instance, would allegedly produce 80,000 jobs, yet two million job losses were expected as a result of the pandemic (Red Universitaria Anticapitalista, 2020).

There is evidence that the government is taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it can more easily impede injunctions issued against megaprojects with the argument that the works cannot be stopped because they are now a 'national priority'. The Presidential Decree of 23 April 2020 designated 38 programmes a national priority, among them the Tren Maya and the Corredor Transistmico. The consultation with indigenous peoples – in compliance with ILO Convention No. 169 – about the construction of the multimodal transport corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was cancelled in March by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources because of the health emergency. Bettina Cruz pointed out how the pandemic undermines social movements' resistance to large-scale infrastructure projects: 'Legal measures are currently blocked by the pandemic. That is, they [the megaprojects] are moving forward and we cannot do anything. Not even file an injunction against the decisions that are made. Why? Because the courts are not open, leaving us completely paralysed' (Red Universitaria Anticapitalista, 2020).

At Red Universitaria Anticapitalista's Facebook event, discussant Gilberto López Rivas, an anthropologist at the National Institute of Anthropology and History, contended that, 'Nothing has been learned from the pandemic. We continue to think of extractivist, developmentalist models of accumulation by dispossession – militarised accumulation' (Red Universitaria Anticapitalista, 2020). Following a classic neoliberal rationality, the Mexican president's COVID-induced austerity measures imply a significant slimming down of the state, closing down ten sub-secretariats. Simultaneously, however, budgets have been secured for the National Guard, the Navy and the Army. In a special agreement signed on 8 May 2020, AMLO expanded the powers of the military to participate in crime prevention work, safeguard citizens and their assets, make arrests, and collaborate with federal authorities in surveillance, verification and inspection functions. Social movement activists have not forgotten the president's famous dictum from last year: 'Come thunder, rain or lightning: the Tren Maya will happen'. Now, they are worried that AMLO might deploy the military to force through large-scale investment projects, such as mining activities, dam construction, mineral extraction and infrastructure projects on indigenous territories.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a blow to indigenous communities on many levels: besides the painful loss of loved ones, they are experiencing loss of income from market

trading, the aggressive advance of megaprojects on their territories, and the withdrawal of vital legal tools intended to guarantee their democratic right to protect their land, identities and way of life.

One of the activists' central arguments against AMLO's planned megaprojects on indigenous land has been that there is insufficient access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare, and people want these demands addressed first. UN Special Rapporteur Francisco Calí highlighted in May 2020 that the indigenous communities that have best resisted the pandemic are those that have the autonomy to manage their lands, territories and resources, thus guaranteeing food security (United Nations, 2020). This crisis could in fact provoke a turning point for the implementation of those large-scale infrastructure projects that are based on the privatisation or financialisation of *ejidos* (land distributed to rural communities in Mexico's agrarian reform). *Ejidatarios* who have been asked to give up their land in order to become shareholders of the Tren Maya (Núñez Rodríguez, 2020), for instance, might begin to reconsider the wisdom of abandoning food security for extremely uncertain future revenues from the megaproject, such that the social and economic systems that support food sovereignty, such as the Mayan *milpa*, might experience a revival.

Acknowledgements

This project has received funding from the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 844176.

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