

Marcos Leyva: Building the Base

EDUCA (Servicios para una Educación Alternativa) focuses on three areas: promotion of integral communitarian development, strengthening of communitarian organizations, and support of initiatives that strengthen civil society.

The first program, “Building Citizenship,” focuses on promotion of integral communitarian development. It generates actions to help people develop an awareness of their rights that can lead to informed participation. This goes beyond the mere act of voting; the goal is to generate activities that allow political involvement, such as participation in communal development councils.

The second program is aimed at strengthening of communitarian organizations by generating economic activities, such as savings banks and cooperative supply stores in the Oaxacan indigenous communities.

Finally, through supporting initiatives that strengthen civil society, the third program deals with *municipios** and the indigenous communities that live there. Our activities here are aimed at building a closer relationship with the indigenous authorities; we instruct them and help them form democratic systems so they can perform as municipal authorities.

Process, not Success, is Key

In all of this, we use the experience and the pedagogical/political proposal of popular education, which Paulo Freire started in Latin America. Like Freire, we firmly believe that starting from such educational and organizational processes enables the population to regain access to their rights to demand participation and better living conditions.

Since we start from the concept of popular education, we deal with processes that are not enclosed in a one- or two-year project timeframe. For example, we’ve been working during the last seven or eight years in communities, such as Santiago Izcayutla. There, we have had various collaborations aimed at

* *Municipio* is an administrative area similar in scope to a municipality or county.

* A *cacique* is a local leader, usually indigenous, who exercises his power in an authoritarian manner.

* *Plantones* are tent and hut camps in the streets, for temporary housing of civil resistance fighters and their families.



generating political, organizational, and economic capacities. As a result, the *municipio's* inhabitants are becoming empowered and claiming their rights.

When we started with the Building Citizenship program, the residents were fighting a local *cacique*.* He wouldn't allow them to elect their municipal authorities and imposed his personal choices for the municipal presidency. In response, a process of reflection and organization began taking shape. The first years of struggle we had *plantones*.* These were hard battles, which sometimes resulted in deaths. But, after a great deal of sacrifice, the community finally gained the right to elect its representatives. From that moment, community members started to support economic and capacity-building projects with municipal authorities.

In this case, we've achieved our goal. First, community members got to know their rights; second, they came forward to demand these rights; third, a process of active, gender-inclusive participation has been generated in that *municipio*. The methodology and the perspective of popular education have been fundamental in generating educational activities that build people's capacity to take possession of their new roles.

Building the Solidarity Economy

Five years ago, we began working with community groups to organize economic activities that would create changes in the social structure. We now have 20

Photo: Marcos Leyva, director of EDUCA, in Oaxaca, Mexico.

© 2007 B. Jesse Clarke

Continued on page 56

projects grouped into a network of communitarian economic projects.

This network has allowed us to focus on economic, social, and cultural rights, in addition to economic issues. An awareness has been generated that you need more than economic projects to improve your living standards—you also need to link them to political processes, and vice versa.

Women and Culture

Inherent to all of these programs are the two strategic axes of indigenous people's rights and the issue of gender. These are not separate topics: they are implicit and spread through all our programs. As part of the methodology, we start with men-only and women-only groups and then they share a common space for discussion. This leads to more mixed groups because women feel that they have a space to discuss things from their point of view.

There are some tensions due to individualism. We try to grapple with that by recalling that in the deeper sense, we are dealing with persons, not individuals. We insist on collective processes that help in the formation of persons. It's hard to overcome the tendency toward individualism without communitarian processes that emphasize the formation of persons. We strive to find an equilibrium. It is difficult, but we concentrate on *concientization** processes. We believe that when people internalize communitarian principles, they will understand that their efforts are going to have a positive effect to achieve social benefits.

We also ensure that the people's cultural rights are taken into account and that the educational content is culturally relevant. We have 16 different indigenous languages and use a translator from the villages to help in the communication process. Educational materials are translated to convey the values of tolerance, diversity, and respect to their cultural background and start from the premise that each of us knows something and has something to say.

* *Concientization* is an educational process that raises participants' awareness of the social, economic, and political forces that condition their lives.



Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca

The uprising was the result of 10 years of consciousness-raising by the teachers' unions on behalf of people's politicization. It achieved a lot, even if not enough.

But despite the public school teachers' participation, the schools themselves are not truly part of the process. The teachers cannot use educational materials and facilities because those "belong" to the official programs

and are meant to be used for formal education purposes. Teachers can't do popular education inside the schools, so they teach outside their schedule and outside the formal system. This kind of popular education work by teachers aided in forming this solidarity system. The churches—especially the Catholic church—also helped, since they adhere to liberation theology's preferential option for the poor. They have carried the spirit of solidarity and responded to popular needs since the 1970s through forming Christian groups and doing capacity-building. Leftist parties have contributed in forming leaderships, too. And then there are non-governmental organizations like ours. These four are at the base of this movement. Together we have been able to encourage people to take the path of increased awareness and demand their rights. Most of this is due to popular education.

Prospects for Change

We've struck a big blow to the political system in Oaxaca. We have to strike again so it falls, but I believe the system has received a deadly hit. Many things are happening in our communities. We think we're on the path that leads to deeper changes—not only the change of the Oaxacan governor but the transformation of Oaxaca. Despite our struggles and our accomplishments, power is still centralized. Changes are slow to come. Yet, people are participating and becoming mobilized. We hope that people keep on participating, but it's tough. At this moment we're simply full of hopes. ■

the Race, Poverty Environment



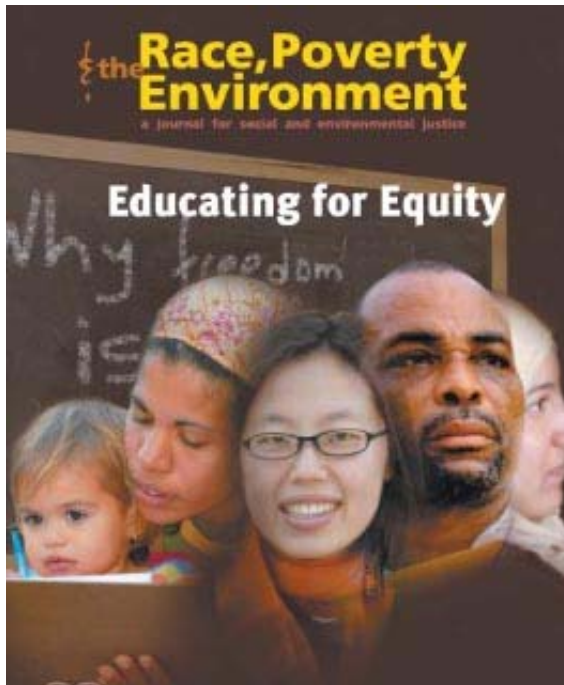
a journal for social and environmental justice

www.urbanhabitat.org

First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, **RP&E** is now published twice annually by **Urban Habitat** and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

Don't miss any of our passionate, in-depth discussions of important social topics!

Support RP&E: subscribe today!



Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

- Spring 1990 ▶ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ▶ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ▶ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ▶ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ▶ Energy
- Winter 1992 ▶ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ▶ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ▶ Water
- Fall 1992 ▶ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ▶ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ▶ Population and Immigration
- Fall 1993 ▶ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ▶ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ▶ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ▶ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
- Fall 1995 ▶ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ▶ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ▶ The Border
- Winter 2000 ▶ A Place at the Table: Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ▶ Reclaiming Land and Community: Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ▶ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ▶ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ▶ Governing from the Grassroots: EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ▶ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and Environmental Justice
- Winter 2005 ▶ Burden of Proof: Using Research for Environmental Justice
- Winter 2006 ▶ Moving the Movement: Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ▶ Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice

Yes! I want an annual subscription to Race, Poverty & the Environment.
Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.

\$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support the advancement of social, economic, and environmental justice in the Bay Area and beyond.

I want to support Urban Habitat with a tax-deductible donation of:

\$25 \$50 \$100 \$500 \$1,000 Other \$ _____

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard
 Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____

(Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____