

## Solidarity and Intercultural Communication in Chiapas, Mexico

Roy Krøvel, Oslo University College

This article builds on interviews and observations made over 15 years—1994 until 2009—during the outbreak of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico. The author was only one of many thousand journalists, activists and researchers visiting indigenous Zapatista villages. Taking the small village of Diez de Abril as a starting point, the article analyses consequences for construction and reconstruction of culture and community induced by this intensive intercultural communication. The article demonstrates the capability of indigenous communities to adapt and reconstruct themselves when facing new challenges. Indigenous communities can benefit from intercultural communication to open new spaces for themselves, actively responding and adapting to new national or global realities, sometimes becoming influential participants in global communication. Far from being static, unchangeable, and relying on essential identities, Zapatista communities willingly reconstructed identities and communities.

Armed indigenous peasants from the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) attacked police stations and army bases in Chiapas, a Mexican state, on the 1st of January 1994. It did not take long before the army had driven the rebels on the run, so the EZLN retreated deep into the jungle and up in the mountains.

The Mexican regime tried to control the information seeping out from the war zone, but soon realized it was not possible. Information kept coming from the jungle and being distributed on the Internet, which only recently had been introduced in Chiapas. Global networks of organizations started organizing activities supporting the EZLN, using news lists and later homepages to mobilize support.

The war lasted only 10 days, but over the following years the news led to intense cooperation and communication between indigenous communities supporting the Zapatistas and solidarity groups in Europe and elsewhere in North America. Only seven months after the outbreak of the war, several thousand supporters convened in the remote village of Guadalupe Tepeyac. Thousands more were sent by human rights groups and NGOs to live in isolated villages as observers. Numerous Mexican and international observers and solidarity workers played an important part in stopping any attempt by the Mexican Army and police to defeat the Zapatistas (Castells, 1996, 1997; Cleaver, 1998; Cleaver & Holloway, 1998; Holloway, 2005; Russell, 2001). Thousands of landless indigenous peasants took advantage of the stalemate that followed. Several hundred farms were taken over by landless peasants all over Chiapas after 1994.

The small village Diez de Abril was founded by landless peasants after the war. The inhabitants came from two nearby villages. They were indigenous peasants speaking two different tongues, Tzeltal and Tojolobal. Many had earlier been poorly paid workers on the local estates. According to the constitution up until the 1990s, indigenous communities were entitled to land. Yet, almost all of the indigenous communities of the area had been locked in long lasting legal disputes to obtain more land; they were getting nowhere. So, on the 10th of

April 1995, approximately 100 indigenous families simply took over one of the last private farms of the region.

This article will try to show how the intercultural communication affected understandings of rights, human rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights in the community. The intercultural communication also affected those visiting the Zapatista communities, thus participating in constructing a global solidarity movement of importance to the radical "anti-globalization" movement. The paper will also demonstrate that the indigenous Zapatista communities themselves were able to respond to externally induced processes of change.

The next section will present briefly the methodology of the investigation, before moving on to a section on guerrillas, identity, and communication before 1994. The section "War, Solidarity, and Communication" will provide a background for the intercultural communication in the Zapatista communities, while the section "The Irish Mexico Group" focuses on one of the many international solidarity groups engaged in the village Diez de Abril. In the section "Global Indigenous Movement" the article discusses the influence of a selected number of famous writers and journalists visiting and reporting on Chiapas and the Zapatistas. Then, the article returns to the theme of construction of community in the village Diez de Abril, focusing especially on the understandings of human rights and indigenous rights. Most importantly, I will try to illustrate the capability of indigenous communities to adapt and reconstruct themselves when facing new challenges.

### Methodology

This paper is partly built on an investigation I made for my PhD dissertation. It includes interviews with local leaders in Diez de Abril, Zapatista regional leaders in the Ocosingo, Altamirano and San Andres regions, and soldiers and officers of the Zapatista army (EZLN). I have also interviewed representatives of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Chiapas, in addition to numerous more or less independent activists from Mexico, Norway, Italy, and Ireland. The U.S. Representatives of the following organizations are among those interviewed in the course of the investigation: Irish Mexico Group; The Latin America Groups (Norway); Ya Basta (Italy); CAPISE (Mexico); CIEPAC (Mexico); Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas; A. C (Mexico); and DESMI (Mexico). The interviews were conducted from 1994 until 2009. A total of 120 persons were interviewed.

I also consulted numerous written sources, especially those published by individual activists and solidarity groups on the web, including (but not limited to) the news lists Chiapas-L and Chiapas-95, and the webpage of the Irish Mexico Group. I have especially focused on Chiapas-L of February 1995 and March 2001, each containing between 500 and 800 postings. (The webpage of Irish Mexico Group no longer exists, but an archive of articles can still be found at <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico.html>.) The selected articles will be presented in more detail in the section on the Irish Mexico Group.

I drew on the coverage of Diez de Abril in Mexican, Irish and Norwegian media, especially the Norwegian tabloids *Dagbladet* and *VG*. I have also included selected authors writing on the conflict, among them Nobel laureates Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz, and Jose Saramago, and others like Naomi Klein, John Berger, and Eduardo Galeano.

*Before 1994: The Elders on the First Visits of the Zapatistas*

The group of elders of Diez de Abril is the highest authority of the community. I had the opportunity to speak with individual members on several occasions, in addition to a formal meeting with all present. Being the eldest, they are potentially good sources for the oral history of the development of the community. The elders unanimously remembered the first visits from the guerrilla as a turning point in their lives. They frequently used these first encounters with revolutionary politics as a watershed, referring to a time “before,” when they were “humiliated” and “poor,” and a time after—a time of “dignity” and “strength.” These first encounters took place in the late '80s, only a few years after EZLN successfully established bases in the densely forested regions of Ocosingo and Altamirano.

The EZLN was not the first organization for small farmers and landless peasants in the region. Several others, for instance CIOAC, OCEZ and “Union the Uniones,” already had a membership of several tens of thousands, all demanding land reform in accordance with the constitution. The EZLN was the most militant of these organizations, offering military training to the increasingly radicalized communities.

EZLN has many roots, but one of the most important, no doubt, takes us back to Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution of 1959. Castro’s guerrilla was by no means the first Latin American guerrilla organization, but what surprised many, including the Cuban leadership, was the speed with which the regime fell apart. It took only three years from Castro, Guevara and a few guerrilleros landing on the Cuban shores until their final victory. This inspired Guevara to formulate a theory on revolution in Latin America (Guevara, 1972, 1997; Guevara & Deutschmann, 2003). While Marxist-Leninists saw the communist party as the organizing force of the revolution, Guevara reserved that role for the guerrilla organization. A small group of dedicated men and women (the “foco”) could make the situation ripe for revolution by military means, according to Guevara (Castañeda, 1993; Loveman & Guevara, 1997). This was due to what Guevara saw as a special situation in Latin America, where many countries were run by authoritarian, and often isolated juntas or dictators vulnerable to social revolt. By attacking the regime and resisting repression, the “foco” would prove that the regime was not invincible, according to Guevara, thereby unleashing the full potential of the farmers, workers and other revolutionary forces.

The influence of Guevara is seen clearly in what we can call the collective memory of the inhabitants of Diez de Abril. Many young men of the region joined the Zapatistas and received military training. Others provided financial or political support. Another aspect was a nationalist perspective. The focus on regime and regime change tended to underline the identity of being Mexican. Both the elders of Diez de Abril and others often framed their analysis within the framework of the state. They saw themselves as Mexicans, frequently displaying symbols of their Mexicanness, such as flags, national anthems, and the like.

The most important trait of the inhabitants of Diez de Abril was nonetheless being landless peasants. The struggle for land united peasants of the region from different communities and ethnicity, and across language barriers.

The first communiqué from the EZLN in 1994 placed the movement solidly inside a Latin American tradition of guerrilla organizations (EZLN, 1993). The Zapatistas demanded land for landless peasants and called for a national revolution to roll back liberal economic

reforms and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But in the first communiqué there was no reference to indigenous rights.

This first part has mostly been based on interviews. Memory or oral history is a risky business. A number of processes tend to bend and shape our memory and what we remember, especially regarding normative issues stirring strong feelings on identity and rights. Nevertheless, these findings are important for understanding later meetings between inhabitants of Diez de Abril and solidarity activists.

### *War, Solidarity, and Communication*

The war and subsequent conflict in Chiapas resonated well with radical groups in Europe and North America. At least 4,000 activists traveled to the tojolobal region of Las Cañadas in August 1994 to participate in “The National Democratic Congress.” In 1996, EZLN organized “The First Intergalactic Congress” in a small community called La Realidad where 4,000 to 6,000 attended. Many of the participants used e-mail to keep in contact with friends and other activists back home, making sure they reached many more than just those present in La Realidad. In addition, EZLN published the welcoming speeches and the concluding remarks in a book. Several thousand of these activists later helped organize a world-wide referendum on the future strategy; at least three million cast their vote. Thousands more travelled to Chiapas to live for shorter or longer periods with the Zapatistas. These examples illustrate the intensive and massive intercultural communication in Chiapas after 1994.

A number of NGOs sent human rights observers to the communities most affected by the violence of the counter-insurgency. Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (CDHFB) sent more observers than any other organization, but Enlace Civil was also an important link between Zapatista communities and solidarity activists. The Mexican army had set up a military base just three kilometers from Diez de Abril, and patrols passed daily, just a few hundred meters from the community. The community therefore asked for international observers. The first observers came to Diez de Abril organized by CDHFB. But as the friendships between Zapatistas and solidarity activists grew, an Irish organization proposed to set up a permanent camp in the community. The Irish Solidarity Group asked permission from the community to send solidarity activists directly, without having to use CDHFB as an intermediary. The proposal had to be presented at the general assembly of Diez de Abril, and the assembly agreed to the proposal, but made the first six months a “time of probation.”

### *The Irish Mexico Group*

The Irish Mexico Group (IMG) is one of many organizations cooperating with the Zapatistas in Chiapas. The first agreement between Diez de Abril and IMG gives us some insight into the initial motives for the cooperation. The agreement outlines five reasons or goals: the activists from IMG were to “accompany” the community, help in the daily work and try to secure funding for developmental projects in the community. The fourth goal was to use the media in Ireland to stimulate interest for the conflict in Chiapas. For the final goal, the two parties were to exchange ideas on the “global struggle” and “resistance” against the neo-liberal hegemony.

The cooperation between IMG and Diez de Abril distinguished itself from the activities of the many human rights organizations in Chiapas, as IMG did not see itself as a neutral observer, but as an active participant. The cooperation also distinguished itself from the ordinary developmental projects in Chiapas. IMG was a revolutionary organization and saw a direct link between its own experiences back home in Ireland and the struggle in Chiapas. The solidarity activities in Diez de Abril were meant to “arm” the activists with “energy” and insight which later could be used in their daily “struggle” in their own neo-liberal “colony.” Both struggles were seen as integral parts of the same global revolutionary struggle (Anonymous, 1997).

Eight months after the general assembly, the Irish activists could sum up the cooperation so far. They felt they had achieved important results. The activists had to find firewood and cook their own meals, but apart from that, they could spend most days working in the fields. January was mainly used to clean up and prepare the fields. The activists joined the peasants in picking coffee beans in February. The beans earned them three dollars per kilo. They harvested bananas in March, worked in the forest most of April, spent June in the maize fields, while August was dedicated to sawing and weaving with the women of the community. In August, the Irish activists proudly noted that the community now seemed to be more open towards the foreigners (Anonymous, 1997). The general assembly had chosen Marcos, one of the members of the community, to coordinate the cooperation, and Marcos felt that the time had come to make a more long-term agreement with IMG. This finally made IMG feel fully accepted as a partner.

Progress on the developmental projects proved more difficult. IMG proposed a project to install a system for drinking water in the community since the poor quality of the water was a serious health problem, especially for smaller children. The women spent much of their time carrying water from the river running through the valley. The community agreed on the need for such a project, but turned down the offer. The members of the community at the time felt the situation too difficult and unstable to invest resources and many working hours in a water project. IMG instead launched a project to build latrines connected to the houses in the village. The water project was only realized once the military tension was reduced after the elections and the subsequent political changes in 2000.

The developmental projects were in general of very limited scope, but nevertheless of importance for the relationship between foreigners and members of the community. The projects proved to the community that the foreign activists came with more than empty words (Krøvel, 2004c). The most important result was, nevertheless, the experience of working together side by side, and the personal friendships that grew out of the experience. Many long-lasting friendships were initiated digging ditches or collecting firewood.

### *Security and Human Rights*

The foreign activists soon realized that the most urgent need was to “accompany” (“acompañar”) the members of the community. Diez de Abril was under constant pressure from the army and the police since the community was established on squatted land. The Zapatistas of Diez de Abril believed the presence of foreigners would make them safer. The foreigners therefore spent much time reporting on military patrols entering the community, military helicopters flying over the village and taking photos, military check-points on nearby

roads, and threats from one of the several paramilitary groups operating in the region. The reports were sent to activists in the global solidarity network, and used to attract more activists to the various groups and organizations supporting the Zapatistas. What happened in Diez de Abril was no longer only local, but global news. While many in Chiapas had never even heard about Diez de Abril and what happened there, a small group of activists in countries far away followed the news from Diez de Abril closely.

Activists in the solidarity network could not do much with the information in Dublin or Oslo. But human rights organizations in San Cristóbal de las Casas could do something, although they depended to a large extent on donations from foreign organizations. They followed up on arrested Zapatistas, visited prisoners, provided legal advice, appealed sentences, and in general, put pressure on local and national authorities. The Zapatistas in Diez de Abril quickly learned how to use the global network in their local struggle for land (Anonymous, 2001; Gómez Sántiz, 1998, 2000; Statement of Diez de Abril Community, Altamirano Municipality, Chiapas, on the 15th of April 1998, 1998). The authorities of the community wrote letters of protests and petitions which IMG were only happy to distribute on the Internet and through their channels internationally.

As early as the autumn of 1997, the Irish activists concluded that the cooperation had been a success on almost all accounts. The efforts to stimulate interest in the mainstream media seemed to have been especially fruitful. IMG had helped one Irish writer/journalist and a television team of four visiting Diez de Abril. Eleven different activists had written articles on their visits to the community, all published on IMGs own homepage and elsewhere on the Internet. Later IMG also contributed to arrange a visit by the famous Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. His pictures were afterwards published in books, magazines, and newspapers all over the world, and reached many more than the reports from the Irish activists.

### *Global Indigenous Movement*

I will now turn from the anonymous activists occasionally living in one small community in Chiapas to some examples of more well-known solidarity activists and visitors to Chiapas. Many of those visiting the Zapatistas were famous writers, thus reaching a much wider audience than the “ordinary” foreign activists. These authors played a particularly important role in constructing a specific understanding internationally of the conflict in Chiapas, an understanding that over the years has restricted the range of options for repression or a military “solution” in Chiapas. Interestingly enough, these writers often had an understanding of the conflict that differed from the version presented by the Zapatistas themselves in their first declaration in 1994.

I will now take a closer look at some of these versions of the conflict. The stories told by Taibo, Saramago and Klein, all deal with poverty, repression, and the fight for justice (Klein, 2001; Saramago, 1999; Taibo II, 1994). The combination of racism and poverty is the real reason for the conflict, according to these writers. But Saramago, Klein, García Márquez, Mosiváis, and Vázquez Montalbán ask for more before accepting the armed rebellion (García Márquez, 2001; Monsiváis, 2001; Vázquez Montalbán, 1999). A justified rebellion must also present a viable alternative to the existing injustice. They want an alternative project of rebellion, based on democratic participation. In these stories, the arguments of democracy and

participation are linked to an image of indigenous societies and indigenous politics: Democratic participation means something deeper and more meaningful in these societies than in Western society.

Many of the articles go on to compare the EZLN with other Latin American guerrilla organizations that tried to encourage indigenous peoples to rebel. Debray is particularly interesting because he had such a profound effect on the revolutionary left both in Latin America and Europe after publishing his accounts of the Cuban revolution (Debray, 1967; Debray & Guevara, 1975). He also joined Che Guevara's failed insurgency in Bolivia in 1967, but survived. His article on the Zapatistas was initially printed in *Le Monde* in 1996 (Debray, 1996) and later reprinted elsewhere. Most of the article tells the story of his meeting with subcomandante Marcos in the village La Realidad. Debray constructs an image of a romantic, revolutionary Indian. Debray's indigenous peoples are oppressed, but proud, free and democratic by nature. EZLN is said to be built on the Indian communities' nature, where power flows "from below." The Zapatistas are therefore the opposite of, and the perfect antidote to, the violent guerrilla organization Shining Path of Peru.

Debray's article is in many ways typical for the reporting from Chiapas. It is a story of disillusionment, a disillusionment not because of the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, but with revolutionary movements of Latin America. Guerrilla organizations like Shining Path and las FARC were at the time isolated, loathed by workers and intellectuals, dependent on criminal activity to survive, and responsible for massive violations of human rights. EZLN is presented as an alternative, which demonstrates the possibility of being revolutionary while not supporting authoritarian movements.

The selected articles also construct the Zapatistas as a movement in contrast to other indigenous movements in Latin America, as clearly seen in the article of Eduardo Galeano (Galeano, 1996). Galeano received instant fame when he published *The Open Veins of Latin America* (Galeano, 1973). He does not see himself as a neutral observer, but feels part of a community of activists and Zapatistas. EZLN has many dimensions in Galeano's story, but the indigenous identity is particularly important. The imagined community of the indigenous peoples is said to be born from "500 years" of cruelty. This oppression of indigenous peoples justifies the armed insurgency in Galeano's history. While both Galeano and Debray see a democratic political practice as a natural part of indigenous tradition in Chiapas, Naomi Klein and Saul Landau develop this argument even further, using Zapatista slogans as argument for an anti-authoritarian global revolutionary movement (Klein, 2001; Landau, 2002).

These articles construct an organization, EZLN, which is indigenous, in contrast to those Latin American guerrilla organizations that claimed to fight on behalf of indigenous peoples, and mostly failed miserably. According to these articles, it was the identity as indigenous that transformed the Zapatistas into a democratic movement, which again underlines the difference between EZLN and the other Latin American guerrilla organizations.

All these authors seem to support the EZLN for at least three reasons: because it is revolutionary but still democratic; and because it is indigenous. John Berger brings these three reasons together elegantly to form a new and surprising argument against neo-liberalism (Berger, 1999). Free trade and the free markets may have celebrated victories all over the world, but if the supposedly rational competition to maximize profits wins everywhere, the world will become poorer. Neo-liberalism must be fought because it has become such a success. José Saramago, Carlos Monsiváis and John Holloway also follow this line of thought

(Holloway, 1998). The Zapatistas are fighting for the right to be different from the rational profit-maximising ideal, which is a fight for us all, according to the authors.

It is not my intention to say that the Zapatistas are not indigenous, democratic, or revolutionary, or that the authors of the articles discussed here were wrong. The Zapatistas were indeed indigenous, or to be more precise, they were Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Chol etc. Some even wore traditional costumes. All had felt discrimination because of their ethnicity. But what unified the Zapatistas and brought them together in one organization were their common interests as peasants and Mexicans. That is why the first declaration (1994) talks of land for the landless and of revolution in Mexico. It was first and foremost from the outside they were seen as indigenous. For example, from the outside it was easier to see the many similarities between the experiences of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil and those of the Aymara of Bolivia, Miskito of Nicaragua and the Sami of Norway.

### *Construction of Community*

Living and working in Diez de Abril had profound effects on the Irish solidarity activists and others visiting the community as part of the IMG-project; and I have discussed that elsewhere (Krøvel, 2006). Here I will focus on some of the important effects it had on the community of Diez de Abril. Some of these effects were visible to any visitor allowed to go for a walk in the village. From small wooden huts one could hear music from ghetto-blasters, sometimes Mexican corridos or rancheras, but more often reggae or rock. Young men and women were playing soccer or basketball, wearing the colors of Barcelona, Manchester United, or AC Milan. The inhabitants of Diez de Abril showed many signs of belonging to an increasingly global community. Much of this was due to the intense and close contact with the foreign visitors, but other processes also played a role. Many members of the community began traveling to the markets in Ocosingo and San Cristóbal de las Casas to sell their products and buy supplies, especially after the military tension decreased in 2000. Some of the younger members of the community even travelled to nearby towns to receive education. In addition, the community sent commissions to NGOs in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Some emigrated to Cancun or other cities to look for jobs, returning only during vacations to visit their families in Diez de Abril. Diez de Abril was gradually integrated in regional, national and global cultural, economic and political processes.

Human rights quickly became increasingly important in the political discourse in Chiapas. Several authors have noted that a human rights discourse was mostly absent in Chiapas before the 1990s. The first human rights organization was formed by Samuel Ruíz, bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, as late as in 1989. Less than 10 years later, 10 local, four national and at least nine international human rights organizations maintained a permanent presence in Chiapas (Collier & de Leon Pasquel, 2001a, 2001b). Diez de Abril appealed to “human rights” when protesting arrests or other military or police intervention, and relied on human rights organizations for legal advice and for help in publishing information.

But Diez de Abril realized that they needed to learn more about human rights themselves. Independent human rights organizations in San Cristobal de las Casas offered courses on topics like indigenous rights and women’s rights. Increasing knowledge of rights in general, and human rights in particular, stimulated important developments in the community, and the



community started to discuss how to develop institutions and procedures to facilitate the adoption of human rights within their already well-developed system of governance. New “cargos” (collection of secular and religious positions, which in Chiapas are normally held by men) were established so that there was always someone in the community responsible for defending human rights if necessary (Krøvel, 2004a). “Los responsables” for human rights functioned both as “lawyers” defending individual members of the community when charged with breaking laws or rules of the community, and “ombudsmen” entrusted with overseeing other committees and commissions in the complex structure of governance.

“Human rights” in Diez de Abril was more than just another set of norms and values mechanically imported from the outside; they were developed and adapted to existing norms, values, institutions, and procedures. The community, for example, established two separate institutions for the protection of human rights: one for women and one for men. This separation reflected existing views on gender in the community. Women and men were not only individual members of the community as a whole, but also belonged to their respective sub-community, often with their own sets of norms and values attached.

An organization called La Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos ushered in a new phase in the fast spreading human rights discourse. In the first phase human rights organizations located in San Cristobal de las Casas and other towns defended members of Diez de Abril, bringing the human rights discourse to Chiapas. In the second phase, communities started to develop the necessary knowledge to use human rights to defend themselves from actions by the police, army, or landowners. La Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos wanted to strengthen local institutions for human rights in the communities, so that the communities could use their rights to defend themselves without having to rely on NGOs (Krøvel, 2004b). The organization was founded in 1999, and invited 26 small communities in eight different regions of Chiapas to choose someone to become “defender” of human rights. The project was meant to transfer knowledge and competence to these 26 selected human rights defenders, who all came from indigenous communities (La Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos. *¿Quiénes somos?*, 2005). Diez de Abril sent one young man and one young woman for training with La Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos in San Cristobal de las Casas. After finishing the courses at La Red de Defensores Comunitarios por los Derechos Humanos, the two “defenders” were supposed to take up important “cargos” in the community.

The development of institutions and procedures related to human rights in Diez de Abril was a result of the interplay of several processes, including global human rights organizations, a global network of solidarity organizations and local understandings of tradition. Similar processes could also be described relating to women’s rights and new roles for women in the community as well as other processes of change, but that will be left for later articles.

### *Understandings of Human Rights in Diez de Abril*

I have so far tried to develop an understanding of the cooperation between foreign activists supporting the Zapatistas and local Zapatista communities like Diez de Abril. I have also explained why the indigenous perspective was so important for the foreign activists, and

how this influenced the Zapatista discourse itself. This process was particularly visible during the failed peace process between the EZLN and the government, beginning in San Andres in 1995.

Both the government and the EZLN invited hundreds of “advisors” to participate in the talks in San Andres. The EZLN’s 358 invited advisors were mainly representatives of peasant organizations or recruited from the global solidarity network. In addition they invited a number of academics and experts with in-depth knowledge of indigenous issues and minority rights. The negotiations were executed in three phases: first, an open plenum with all participants present; thereafter discussion between selected advisers from the two parties on key themes; and finally, hammering out the details of a compromise. The government also seemed to want an open, inclusive process, and arranged 30 workshops all over Mexico with a total of 12,000 participants to discuss the compromise, resulting in 9,000 proposals (López Barcenás, 2004). The government initially seemed to see the negotiations and subsequent process of public discussion as an integral part of the obligations Mexico took on by signing convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), while ILO saw it as an invitation to involve itself in the process in Mexico (López Barcenás, 2004).

EZLN acknowledged that it was not in a position to negotiate such an important issue on behalf of all indigenous peoples of Mexico. It therefore invited, in January 1996, 500 representatives from 35 different indigenous groups to “The National Forum for Indigenous Rights and Culture” in Guerrero (Declaración de la Montaña de Guerrero 1996; Nunca mas un México sin nosotros, 1994). There, the support for the negotiated agreement was overwhelming, and the EZLN could move ahead with firm backing from a unified Mexican indigenous movement.

This short description will make the reader aware of the depth and intensity of the negotiating process. The process was much more than the type of negotiations between warring parties we saw in the ’90s in El Salvador and Guatemala, for instance. In San Andres the parties managed to create an open and inclusive process, which went much further than what any of the two parties had imagined beforehand. The inclusion of NGOs, academics, indigenous peoples and international observers opened doors to new perspectives, and the negotiated compromise had profound effects on both parties, arguably more on the EZLN than on the government. The EZLN presented itself in 1994 as an organization of nationalist Marxists and peasants, much within the traditional framework of Latin American guerrilla organizations. After San Andres, the struggle was reframed to include, and for some time to focus on, indigenous rights as enshrined in international conventions. The negotiations involved not only finding a compromise between the existing positions, but the process itself constructed new versions of the original positions.

Even though the negotiators appointed by government recommended the San Andres agreement, President Ernesto Zedillo refused to sign it. He saw special rights to one group of Mexicans (indigenous peoples) as counter-productive, and sought a different path to “development.” In President Zedillo’s view, indigenous groups were better included in the Mexican society and economy, and he feared the consequences of special protection of indigenous rights. The resulting stalemate in the following years forced all participants and the media to focus intensively on cultural and indigenous issues, as these were seen as the main hurdle in reaching a lasting peace agreement.

It was no surprise that this on-going struggle on indigenous rights came to play an important role in the many local conflicts and land disputes in Chiapas. Landless peasants in Mexico had long enjoyed a right to land, according to the Mexican constitution of 1917, but this right was removed in the process leading up to The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which entered into force in 1994. Indigenous rights, according to the ILO convention number 169, would restore some protection for the indigenous communities, in the view of many Zapatistas in Diez de Abril and elsewhere. This fact must be kept in mind when trying to understand the meanings of “human rights” in Chiapas.

“Human rights” were, by some groups, often seen as a threat to local ways of “doing things,” or as a threat to the old-guard establishment in indigenous communities in the highlands. The constant meddling from human rights organizations in local affairs was sometimes seen as a threat to dominant groups often used to bullying any opposition. The organization Paz y Justicia, for instance, began using the slogan “Human rights are murderers” (Speed, 2001). This came as a response to a report from CDHFB accusing indigenous leaders of Paz y Justicia of being responsible for violence and systematic abuse of human rights in Chol communities (Casas, 1996). The introduction of a human rights discourse in Chiapas inevitably affected a number of local conflicts, including many involving authoritarian indigenous leaders.

### *Collective or Indigenous Rights*

Human rights came, as we have seen, to Diez de Abril in a particular context, and this context is necessary in order to explain the development of the particular understanding of human rights in Diez de Abril. I would claim that the understanding of human rights in Diez de Abril was different from dominating “Western” understandings, often revolving around individual rights. Individual rights were clearly important in Diez de Abril, but were also closely related to understandings of collective rights. To explain how, I need to make a short detour to some leading liberal theorists on rights. A number of different arguments supporting collective rights to indigenous groups can be found in the existing literature (Jovanovic, 2005). Kymlicka, for instance, has challenged standard liberal criticism of group rights as oversimplified (Kymlicka, 1995). The relation between individual rights and group rights are much more complicated, according to Kymlicka. Societies are made up of individuals, of course, but societies can also be said to construct individuals. Language, for example, would be meaningless without a society. Individuals should be free to pursue what they believe to be valuable in life, but the values we use to measure what is valuable or good, can hardly be said to be wholly individually constructed. Societies play an indispensable role in the construction of values, of course. Many minority groups are organized in close relationship to land or territory. Culture, including religion, for instance, is created and recreated as communities live, work and interact on and with land and nature.

This short and, arguably, simplistic representation of the complex arguments for special rights for indigenous peoples is only meant to give a little background to understanding the process of the introduction of a human rights discourse in Chiapas. For the Zapatistas in Diez de Abril, human rights and indigenous rights both offered possibilities in their local struggle for land. On the one hand, individual rights could protect them from arbitrary detention and violence from police, army, or paramilitary groups often operating on behalf of landowners in

the region. But seeing human rights exclusively in an individual perspective would potentially be detrimental to indigenous demands for special rights to land and territory. These claims rested on the view that minority groups are collectively different from the majority society, and deserve unique rights because of their unique historical role and history, as indeed granted in the ILO convention 169. For the Zapatistas of Diez de Abril, this argument resonated well with their historical claims to land.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to track the development of a small indigenous community in Chiapas, Mexico. I have tried to show how understandings of rights, human rights, indigenous rights and women's rights depended on intercultural communication. Activists from global solidarity often arrived in Chiapas equipped with particular idealized visions of indigenous peoples and the struggles they are involved in. Partly because of these idealized visions of indigenous peoples, communities like Diez de Abril could benefit from an already established global discourse of human rights and indigenous rights.

Most of this investigation has been done over the first 15 years since the village Diez de Abril was established. Since the founding of the village a new generation of villagers has grown up, resulting in new processes of change. Many have been forced to leave the village to get education or to seek employment, leading to increasing and new forms of intercultural communication. This would be a fruitful field of further investigation. A substantial group of villagers gradually defected from the Zapatistas to join rival indigenous organizations. I have not been able to conduct interviews with this group. It would also be a potentially fruitful project for further investigation.

Observing the development over more than 10 years, I argue that the community developed institutions and procedures to adapt to this new discourse, but I also argue that the community constructed an understanding of human rights that is different from Western notions focusing on individual rights.

But most importantly, I have tried to illustrate the capability of indigenous communities to adapt and reconstruct themselves when facing new challenges. Indigenous communities can benefit from intercultural communication to open new spaces for themselves, actively responding and adopting to new national or realities global, sometimes becoming influential participants in the global communication. Far from being static, unchangeable, and relying on essential identities, Zapatista communities willingly recreated identities and communities. In one pamphlet, the Zapatista women's group underlined the importance of "creating" "new traditions" or changing old ones ("costumbres") (EZLN, 2004, p. 53). In the case of Diez de Abril this could hardly have been done without the intense communication with "outsiders."

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Based on the following articles from the Irish Mexico Group: (Anonymous, 1998; closer, 1998; Diez de Abril escapes flooding," 1998; Diez de Abril marks 10th April '98," 1998; Fire from the Mountain," 1998; "... the government is mad and lies all the time," 1998; IMG, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d, 1999e, 1999f, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2001; In A Time Of Silence ," 1998; Of Coffee beans and Military Intimidation," 1998; Tales

from the Roadside,” 1998; “We never know when the bloody army will come,” 1998; “We will not surrender,” 1998).

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