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Understanding Women 's Empowerment Through Indigenous Epistemologies: An Alternative Approach To Development?

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UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INDIGENOUS
EPISTEMOLOGIES: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT?

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University of San Francisco Masters of Arts in International Studies

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INDIGENOUS
EPISTEMOLOGIES: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT?

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS
in
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by MELISSA KLARA VONIMARY SØVIK

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Abstract

Development projects that aim at empowering women have gained popularity among many actors and institutions in the field of development for their capacity to contribute in development and economic growth. Nevertheless, the concept of empowerment has also gained critics from various stands claiming it to be too technical, and not taking into account social relations in contexts where other epistemologies exist. It is necessary to adapt these kind of terms taking into account local world-views. This thesis explores the dynamics of women's empowerment in Tzeltal Mayan communities in Chiapas, Mexico. It aims at understanding the way empowerment is manifested in this particular place, in order to generate a way of understanding concepts like these through incorporating local knowledge and epistemology. This ethnographic study adds to ongoing conversations about doing research in indigenous communities and how to empower locals through allowing for their participation in the research process. Furthermore, this thesis looks at the possible role of Solidarity Economy initiatives on women's empowerment. In my findings, I have made a tentative view of what can be seen as Tzeltal-inspired ideas of empowerment, through three points that characterize their empowerment process. I also find that these empowering points are identifiable in various Solidarity Economy initiatives in Tzeltal communities.

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Acknowledgements

Hocolawal ta Apisilic tseltaletic, ch'oletic soc tzotziletic, la ja wotsehson ta anahic soc nix laj awa'ibonic te jc'op laj spahjaltay sba jol'co'tantic, hocolawalic te laj a jam ajol awo'tanic.

Hocolawal yu'un te laj anohptesonic soc la jnahin te ana'ic. Ha'i a'tel ini ya cabey ta stojol soc ay jbet ta stojol tseltal antsetic, but'il ma'yuc scoltaywanejic manchuque ma'yuc ha'i chahpajem a'tel ini.

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Figure 1: Google Maps. *Location of municipality of Chilón, Chiapas*. Accessed on September 7, 2018.

Figure 2: Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. *The different indigenous groups in Chiapas*. 2018.

Introduction

Women in Latin America hold a history of economic, political and social marginalization. Worse off are women from indigenous and rural communities (Rovira 1997). In Mexico, indigenous women hold among the highest poverty indexes, they live in lack of public services and are, moreover, deprived of basic rights. The indigenous Mexican activist Martha Sánchez(2005) discloses that “we suffer from persecution, harassment, imprisoning, the denial of our capacity of dialogue as of being indigenous women by the Mexican state” (54). Being indigenous and a woman in Mexico seem to be two highly limiting factors to a person to be able to make own decisions and to exercise power in society. Historically excluded from political and economic spaces, more and more women are organizing to create spaces where their voices are heard and matter. It is in this context it becomes relevant to talk about efforts that allows for decision-making capabilities to challenge the current power structures.

Implementing women's empowerment as a tool for development has gained increased attention among development practitioners, activist and scholars. The field of development has experienced an important shift towards major efforts in lowering the inequalities between men and women by facilitating more opportunities to women and the processes of her empowerment. At the same time, the use of the term women's empowerment has also been contested from different actors. The implementation of programs that fosters empowerment can in some contexts involve a use of the term that is too technical and methodological, which risks taking away its emancipating meaning. For instance, if not applied carefully, implementing empowerment as part of a development project in societies where the local people hold different worldviews can risk imposing a what can be seen as a “western agenda”, resulting in causing

more harm than good. One potential way to understand a term such as empowerment in the context of indigenous communities which often hold different epistemologies, is through gaining an understanding of the processes of empowerment through acknowledging their own worldview.

The aim of this thesis is to do contribution to ways of conducting research and producing knowledge in indigenous contexts and other places that hold different epistemologies. This is done through a tentative adaption of the concept of women's empowerment, a concept which has been used increasingly among development practitioners and scholars.

Through this research I am exploring the processes and dynamics of empowerment of the Tzeltal Mayan women in Chiapas, Mexico. I seek to get an endeavor to gain an understanding of the meaning of empowerment to these women and its implications in their communities. I am comparing what has previously been written on women's empowerment to my own findings in the field, with the objective of doing a methodological contribution in reconceptualizing a concept used in development that corresponds to people that hold different epistemologies, such as indigenous peoples. By contributing with a tentative framework of Tzeltal empowerment, I hope that it can serve as a way of measuring empowerment among these women. This can be helpful to development organizations and other external actors that seek to implement development programs with an objective of empowering women. Strategies that promote women's empowerment needs to originate from the local community to account for the different cultural understandings of the term. Incorporating indigenous worldviews may improve the chances that projects aimed at empowering women actually will meet the needs that correspond to these women.

Following a visit to Mayan communities in Chiapas January 2018, I quickly noticed the important presence of various local community initiatives, such as cooperatives. These can be tied to the logic of Solidarity Economy, which encompasses alternative ways of organizing economic activities which aims at incorporating a more social agenda. My curiosity lead me to want to understand their impacts in indigenous communities, as well as the opportunities given by this way of organizing enterprises. After various conversations with people I met along the journey, I understood that the numerous indigenous women that joined these enterprises could be a response to decades of social, economic and political struggles. In this study I therefore further seek to understand what role these types of community initiatives play in the process of empowering women. I will be addressing the reasons and motivations of the Tzeltal women to join these enterprises. To be able to answer these questions, I acknowledge the importance of first establishing a comprehensive meaning of empowerment which incorporates the Tzeltal women's own experiences and perceptions.

An ethnographic study was carried out in Chiapas, Mexico, in Tzeltal communities in collaboration with the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón during two months in the fall of 2018. Empowerment of women in Tzeltal Mayan communities was explored through in-depth interviews, as well as through participant observations and analysis of secondary sources. The focus of the fieldwork was to grasp an understanding of the processes of empowerment in these communities to be able to establish a way of recognizing and characterizing the concept of empowerment adequate to these indigenous women. Further, I seek to explore the role of Solidarity Economy projects on the processes of women's empowerment. My study, which applies participatory research methods, highlights the importance of shaping the research'

concepts and measures based on understanding the epistemology of the people we are studying in order to contribute with research that can have positive impacts into these societies.

Literature Review

Women and development

The mainstream development agenda has seen an increase in the advocacy on behalf of women. Well-known development scholars such as Amartya Sen(1990) and Esther Duflo (2012) claim that economic development and women empowerment are interrelated, and that we can talk about a bidirectional relationship between the two. Development can play an important role in decreasing the inequality between women and men, and, the other way around; inequality between men and women can also hinder development. Most development efforts today have gender equality as one of their goals (Kabeer 1999). This explains why empowerment of women has been an important aspect driving increased development. In a statement made at UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues it was said that "the empowerment of indigenous women as powerful agents of change could only strengthen their communities and nations in the face of environmental and other challenges" (UN 2017). Further, the World Bank has named empowerment one of the most important elements to reduce poverty. Focusing on efforts to achieve women's empowerment has become a priority in many development agendas (Malhotra et al. 2002). Scholars and development practitioners insist on the many positive implications of including women in the economy. For instance, an increased participation of women in the workforce can foster a more human and cooperative work environment. Moreover, it contributes to a better status for the women in their households and in their communities (Coughlin & Thomas 2002).

Women's empowerment

The initial use of empowerment and references related to the term date back to the 1960s. Some claim that its origins and sources of inspirations can be traced back to social movements such as the Black Power movement, Ghandism, and feminism (Cornwall and Brock 2005). The term has in these contexts been used to refer to processes of acquiring power on a collective level, processes which often has aimed at changing unequal power relations in the society (Charlier 2007). Empowerment has also been related to abilities of an individual to seize power in order to make its own decisions and to ensure its own well-being. The Colombian feminist Magdalena León (2002) identifies the original idea of empowerment to have been initiated by the movement of women from the global South with the objective to promote a change in their life and to generate a “process of transformation of the social structures.” In this context, groups of women who have been denied certain rights, mobilized in the processes of empowerment to bring about social change. These processes represent collective empowerment.

To fully understand the origins of the term empowerment, one must look at its root term - power. According to Michel Foucault’s logic, power is located everywhere and can be manifested in many different ways. As power does not only reside in one place, but rather is present everywhere in the society, it can be described as a capacity enabled to both individuals and collectives. Likewise, Foucault makes the distinction between appropriating power and exercising power (Foucault 1991). Appropriating power refers to the process in which an individual or a group that previously did not hold power is acquiring it, while exercising power represents the actions of someone who already holds power. Power is therefore subject to be challenged at any point as; “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1978, 95).

Following this logic, exercising power is not exclusively done by an authority, it can be obtained by several parts of a society through processes. It is this empowering process that allows previously marginalized sectors of the society to obtain the ability to take part in decision-making actions (De La A Yagual 2017). León (2002) understands the power component of empowerment to be of dualistic character; on the one hand, it can represent the power to suppress, and on the other hand, it represents the power to decide. Only by understanding empowerment as a process, these two sides of the term can be overcome.

Early theories about empowerment are also found to be tied to philosophy. These theories focus on how oppressed people express themselves and gain power to defeat their position of oppressed (Calvès 2009). Work written on empowerment often makes reference to the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire. In his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire writes about how in a society, a small group of people holds domination over the masses. He calls for a critical consciousness of the oppressed by making the individual more aware of his or her situation and in this way being able to make his or her own choices. The empowerment process starts with reaching consciousness on an individual level, followed by strategic actions made on a collective level in order to reach abilities of self-determination.

Since the 1980s, the term empowerment has frequently been used by activists and practitioners in the field of development, and its use has later expanded into other fields such as health, business and politics (Calvès 2009). Although the promotion and the implementation of empowerment is relevant in many different fields, I will focus on its use in the context of development.

Today, empowerment configures as part of the discourse held by most big development institutions. Claims made in the field of development involve that women's empowerment holds important policy payoffs in areas such as “fertility behavior and demographic transition, children's welfare and infant mortality, economic growth and poverty alleviation” (Kabeer et al. 2001, 17). Increasing efforts towards empowering women has therefore become an important focus topic in many development agendas. To understand empowerment as a development mechanism, it can be helpful to look at empowerment through big development institutions’ definitions. The World Bank describes empowerment in a general matter as “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them” (Bennett 2002). Empowerment can also be described as a process by which those who have not been able to make choices for themselves earns this ability (Kabeer 1999). Another definition of empowerment is that it is the ability of an individual to act according to maintaining and ensuring its own well-being. The term also involves principles rights to participate in decision-making processes that concern them (Calvès 2009). Drawing from these definitions, empowerment can thus be seen as the process of obtaining abilities and capacities to make own choices, both individually and collectively.

There are many different ways in which women can be empowered. These can involve political empowerment, personal empowerment, as well as economic and social empowerment. Researchers and practitioners in the field of development have established a wide variety of measures and indicators concerning women's empowerment. Some of the measures that have been used include mobility, financial security, public participation, public awareness, agency and decision-making ability (Hashemi et al 1996; Klugman et al. 2014). These indicators often

represent objectives that development programs with an empowerment policy will try to meet. Likewise, many studies aim at exploring the impacts of various interventions and development projects on women's empowerment. Microfinance initiatives have served as the case study in numerous papers that illustrate how these type of projects can empower women. According to these studies, women's empowerment can help poor families economically, as well as increase their health and well-being (Mayoux 1997; Wydick 2002; Gurman et al 2016).

Kate Young and Maxine Molyneux, two authors who study women's empowerment, have advanced ideas towards how empowerment can contribute to the change of the power relations in a society. Molyneux(1985) elaborated a methodology to apply the concept of empowerment based on her fieldwork in Nicaragua. She divides the concept of women's interests into practical needs and strategic needs. Practical needs are material needs such as alimentation and security, and derive from the socially constructed roles and the gender division of labor. The strategic needs arise from the women's interests in changing their status and the gender roles. Young furthers Molyneux´s idea by introducing the transformation potential, which can be seen as the bridge between practical and strategic needs (Young 1993). She claims that the potential of transforming the positions in the society develops in the extent to which the practical needs are transformed into strategic needs. According to Young´s concept, empowerment encompasses individual change and will eventually result in collective actions. Afshar et al. (2016) also see empowerment as a process; as it represents an enabling process to individuals that can have implications on a collective level for political and social change.

The social economist Naila Kabeer(1999) has established a division of the process of empowerment to understand its different dimensions, which consists of resources, agency and

achievements. She argues that these three dimensions of empowerment are interrelated, and are in fact necessary to understand in order to develop a measure tied to women's exercise of choice. This process involves the woman's agency based on the resources available in order for the woman to achieve her desired outcomes. The resources can include material, social and human resources, such as finance, land, skills, knowledges and expectations. The resources are allocated through various institutions, and the access of these resources are dependent upon the rules and norms existing in these institutions. The dimension of agency is about decision-making and abilities to negotiation. Agency is central to what it means to be a human being, because agency is what allows a person to make important choices that shapes his or her life (Nussbaum and Glover 1995). Resources and agency constitutes capabilities, which Amartya Sen (2003) refers to as people's' potential to live the life they want. The capabilities enables individuals' functional achievements, which are "the particular ways of being and doing realised by different individuals" (Kabeer 1999, 438). In other words, resources and agency contribute to the desired well-being outcomes to each individual. The outcomes which constitutes the achievement dimension of empowerment, differs depending on each individual's personal or collective desires and aspirations.

As the use of the term empowerment has grown in the field of development, it has also been widely contested. Scholars critical towards the use of empowerment by big development institutions call for a careful use of the term, and especially in cases where it has been tied to specific activities. Some even claim that empowerment has turned into a fashionable word or a cliché used by development practitioners, as well as by scholars (Rowlands 1997; Calvès 2009). An overuse of the term risks taking away its emancipating meaning and turns it into a purely

technical and methodological term (Hoinle et al. 2013). The value of the term itself has likewise been questioned. Some would argue that empowerment has experienced a shift from representing a process of political grassroots organizations with the aim of radically changing unequal political structures, to “a vague and falsely consensual concept” (Calvès 2009). A critique made by Kabeer (1999) claim that since empowerment represents a bottom-up approach, it should therefore not be used as a strategy by external development agencies. Since the process of empowerment in development precisely it about marginalized people themselves obtaining abilities of self-determination, it should not come from “the outside.” Further, it has been argued that empowerment can not be seen as an instrumentalist notion, but rather it should be treated as an active tool that can be used to achieve change by justice (Afshar 2016). These critics might suggest that the way empowerment initiatives has been applied by many development institutions has resulted in a rather “technocratic” approach which might hinder the actual empowerment of women. Development initiatives centered in meeting objectives of women's empowerment, often created too narrow in order to fit measurable goals, risk not taking into account the reality of different power dynamics and other determinant factors that the women face.

Framework used by development institutions is often characterized by essentialism, which has been subject to critique. These critics claim that if not treated carefully, concepts such as women's empowerment can be seen as something absolute which ignores the social construction of gender roles and the multilayered character of the different identities. By targeting women from the developing world, for instance, as the main recipients of empowerment initiatives, development projects risk generalizing and even victimizing these

women. This happens because the institutionalized framework lacks a consideration of the plurality of power relations that might exist in these communities and risks putting all developing women in one category. Depending on the context, the outcomes and issues of women's empowerment vary along with several factors, such as gender and race and their corresponding constellations of power. Social heterogeneity can produce highly unequal distribution of resources in terms of life chances, dignity, and decision-making. It is necessary to understand the different challenges individuals face depending on factors such as gender and socioeconomic backgrounds, because as exemplified by Sarah Radcliffe (2015), "being a woman and rural is qualitatively distinctive from being an urban man, even if incomes are held steady." To get a more realistic and heterogeneous view of women's realities, several authors claim that studying processes of empowerment using intersectionality as a method of analysis is necessary (Hoinle et al. 2013). There are countless of different experiences of being a woman within the same country or region, according to the logic of the intersectionality method.

Furthermore, if empowerment is studied in places where the people hold radically different worldviews than the researcher, a critical assessment of the concept is necessary, and it must be questioned if empowerment can be studied through the same concepts and framework used in the Western world. Institutionalized development programs often risk ignoring the different needs of peoples who hold different epistemologies. The Mexican indigenous women's organization Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas (CONAMI) has several times criticized the disregard of the voice of indigenous women in institutionalized programs for empowerment (Sánchez 2005). In their book about women and empowerment, Afshar et al.(2016) raise important questions concerning what exactly empowerment is and who benefits

from it, because of the many different factors that affect the processes of women's empowerment in different contexts, such as existing power relations, ideologies, policies, and objectives. They seek to understand how empowerment can be measured in a more adequate way that takes into account the different experiences of the women (Afshar et al. 2016). This highlights the necessity of synthesising empowerment to be specific for each case in order to be able to have a positive impact on women.

As follows, the use of empowerment by development agencies, policy makers and researchers needs to take into account the many different and complex social relations and ideologies that shape women's experiences. In order to help women that are disempowered through development initiatives and programs, the first step consists in understanding what empowerment means in different contexts, concerning individuals and groups with different ethnicity, race, epistemology and other determinant factors. In the case of indigenous peoples that very often have a completely different worldview, the term must be thoroughly adapted to be able to make sense according to their worldviews and beliefs. This calls for the need of elaborating a way of understanding what empowerment means to women who hold different epistemologies, and understanding how the processes of women's empowerment is manifested in these places.

Participatory and decolonizing methods

Researching empowerment is essentially about looking at how individuals in a certain place are dealing with the existing power relations in order to empower themselves. As the previous section mentions, this is a process that cannot only be addressed from outside actors

through development initiatives such as the allocation of material resources. Empowerment has to emerge from “within”, through a mode of consciousness from the local(Heshusius 1994). Likewise, conducting research within a group of individuals and their processes of empowering themselves, needs careful considerations. To deal with issues related to a cultural outsider who risk imposing own ideas or knowledge instead of understanding the local knowledge, many researchers have sought after an approach that involves the participation of their research objects. Research methods that follow this logic can operate through different terms such as counter colonial research, decolonizing research, participatory and collaborative research. In general, these types of research seek to value local knowledge, and further, to empower the local communities in where the research takes place.

Many scholars claim that research engaging indigenous communities demands participatory and collaborative methodologies (Bishop 1998; Smith 1999; Nichols 2009). These researchers commit to challenge the power relation between the participant and the researcher. Research done in indigenous and other non-Western places have increasingly taken use of decolonizing research methodology because of the imperative to make research participatory and make the participants actively involved with the process. This hinges on the idea of challenging the essentialist tendencies that occur with the concept of research. Scholars have explored ways to carry out research that does not reproduce situations where external knowledge is imposed into the local communities. It has thus become relevant to elaborate collaborative ways of doing research which constructs a more sustainable social development (Escobar 1995).

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda T. Smith (1999) critically assesses existing Western research methodology. She proposes ways in which non-indigenous people should

conduct research and she essentially aims at replacing the dominating Western research methods. Following the indigenous peoples movement, she accounts for their own research agenda that focuses on attaining the objective of self-determination of indigenous peoples. The indigenous research approach that she proposes involves processes of mobilization, decolonization, healing, recovery and transformation. Smith claims that these seem to be at odds with Western research terminology that are “much too politically interested rather than neutral and objective” (1999, 117). She claims that Western research tradition involves notions that divides into socially constructed categories of race, class and gender and therefore fails to reflect the local culture. Another conflicting issue of Western research methodology is found in the ethical framework. Although most Western research follow a certain ethical guideline, these are not necessarily aligned with the indigenous’ perception of ethics. Indigenous groups have contested that the legal framework of ethics is shaped by the Western sense of the individual and property rights, which fails to account for the more collective sense of rights held by the indigenous peoples.

Other scholars who commit to conduct a more just and accountable research have based their work around what can be called “anti-oppressive research”. Potts and Brown(2005) use the notion of “anti-oppressive research”, which aims at promoting social justice and challenging the power relation through the whole research process. This is done by emphasizing on making commitments with the local people. This way of doing research involves continuously reflecting, challenging and critiquing the efforts made in the process, as well as the production of knowledge. By repeatedly being conscious and self critical, they claim that the transformation of the enterprise of research will take place.

Another scholar that applies collaborative methodology in her research is Ruth Nicholls, who explores ways in which non-indigenous researchers can engage with counter-colonial research. Within the participatory methods of research, we find a reflexive process of collaborative sensemaking. Nicholls has established three layers of reflection that every researcher face; self-reflexivity, inter-personal reflexivity and collective reflexivity. She claims that the third layer consists of the researcher understanding a shift in their personality (Nicholls 2009). This implicates that the researcher must understand and accept new cultural domains by ceding control of the research beyond the initial phase. Reflexivity in the research process has also been tied to feminist methodologies, which involves that the researcher must be aware of the context and all the relations of power and privileges it implies (Nicholls 2009). The positionality of the researcher allows him or her to incorporate interpersonal relationships and opportunities to collaborate deeper with the participants. A crucial element in this research process is to extend the participation of the individuals to the data collection, analysis and distribution. Another part of this research process lies in establishing good relationships with the local community, as it will impact the quality of the data of the research. Developing authentic relations with people in the community will generate more personal information than what is obtained through traditional modes of interviewing research subjects.

Another author asserts that the research participants play important role in shaping the production of the research. According to Goebel(1997), research methods need to let local people generate their own categories, concepts and criteria in order to understand and possibly change their situations. By allowing the local people to not only participate in the research process, but also to be the ones who shape the concepts, it can generate knowledge that

represents a more accurate picture of the local dynamics. This is the type of research that is necessary for challenging the power relation between the researcher and the participants, and eventually has the potential to change social structures.

There has also emerged a new set of critics concerning the participatory method itself and its practices. Gilles Mohan(2006) critiques the way that knowledge is “generated as a first step in reversing the top-down approach of many development initiatives.” Through applying concepts from postcolonial theories, he claims that, in fact, the participatory methods, aiming at including the local actors as decision-making agents, risk maintaining the relations of authority between the researcher and the participants (Mohan 2006). In participatory research, the researcher is often viewing the other as unknowable and furthermore, their rationality is different of the researcher’s one (Campbell 1997).

Another weakness of participatory research method lies in its linguistic nature. It involves that knowledge is created and dealt with by the language, although in reality most knowledge is “non-linguistic, tacit and generated in practice” (Mohan 2006). This results in that much knowledge that is important about a culture risks remaining unknown. The fact that the participatory research method showcases the Western way of thinking makes the research biased from local knowledge from the beginning of the process. The production of knowledge through research also contributes to imposing a certain authority. The reality varies depending on the language in which it is written. After having concluded fieldwork, the researcher has to elaborate the findings into a text that follow a specific framework that is acceptable in academia and for policy makers. This production of knowledge is what Mohan(2006) calls an “‘economism’ of

development agencies whereby soft information has to be made acceptable through its pseudo-scientism to hardened decision makers”(12).

In the methodology for this research, as well as the way I am communicating it, I am incorporating ideas from participatory, collaborative and feminist methodologies, as my research engages with indigenous people. An important component of this research is to let the participants take part in the whole research process. As follows, my research process involves being in constant reflection and critique towards my methodology in order to minimize the asymmetrical power relation that often characterizes Western research (Smith 1999). In my interactions with the Tzeltal people, I have therefore focused on being self-reflective, as Ruth Nichols proposes, in an effort to let the research participants engage actively in the whole process. It has been important to focus on following their own dynamics and premises, which has allowed for a shift of the control of the researcher towards the participants. Through my engagements in the Tzeltal communities, through collaborating in community development projects that benefited the participants, I was able to earn confidence and establish relations with the local people. This is crucial in order to be able to get an understanding and incorporating a local point of view, instead of the point of view of a “cultural outsider.”

Solidarity Economy

There is an extensive literature that explores the possibilities of the Solidarity Economy in the indigenous context which emerged in the late 1980s (Hoinle et al 2013; Corragio 2011; Gudynas 2011; Gaiger 1991). In order to understand the potential benefits from enterprises that

follow the logic of Solidarity Economy on women's empowerment in indigenous communities, I will first look at the context that gave rise to this alternative manner of organizing enterprises.

The body of literature on alternative development arose as a critique to the dominant development regime driven by forces of the capitalist system. Theories critiquing the classical development thoughts emerged in the 1980s, first known as post-development theories. The prominent post-development theorist Arturo Escobar explained development as “a matter of capital, technology, and education and the appropriate policy and planning mechanisms to successfully combine these elements” (Escobar 1992). The classical development thoughts held by mainstream development agencies follow a logic driven by increased economic growth, and that this growth will result in prosperity and maximized outcome to every individual. This can also be observed in a country's national economic policies, in where it focuses on measures that increase its Gross Domestic Product(GDP). It is, however, erroneous to assume that the growth of the GDP will result in improved living conditions for all working people of a country (Klak and Jackiewicz 2002). Through the lens of post-development theory, development has been criticized to represent powers exercised by external agencies to intervene and implement a set of knowledges and worldviews (Hart 2001). Development programs that are implemented in the developing world often come with a set of required conditions that the receiving countries have to follow. These might involve adopting certain policies that can risk to indoctrinate the population towards a certain ideology or a belief system.

Top-down development can be described as efforts made by big development agencies and government entities to alleviate poverty in a technocratic manner, implementing the same programs in often widely different contexts which disregards the voices of the locals, as well as

disregarding their needs and realities. In the context of indigenous communities, the top-down aspect of development has caused numerous conflicts throughout the years. Various development interventions are made without consent and without respecting the collective and individual rights of indigenous communities. These types of development practices that are being imposed by international institutions, state or local agency with the aim of “developing” communities, have more than often led to the expropriation of indigenous territories and natural resources, and degrading their living conditions (Gudynas 2009). Through her studies on alternative development in indigenous communities in Chiapas, Michaela Giovannini (2016) illustrates how development projects that have been introduced in Chiapas by state and federal government, follow the same top-down approach. Despite having received a large number of development programs, Chiapas remains one of the poorest states in Mexico measured in GDP per capita (CONEVAL 2014). Giovannini’s (2016, 1141) study on community enterprises demonstrates that members of these enterprises claimed that government implemented development programs in Chiapas “seem to be ineffective in tackling indigenous peoples’ needs, as they do not take indigenous worldviews into account and they do not involve indigenous people in the decision-making process affecting their social, economic and environment resources.”

Post-development theory aims, among others, to give a voice to non-Western actors, since Western actors are the ones who are promoting the dominant development paradigms. International agencies (such as the World Bank and the IMF) shape their development policies based on their assumptions of needs in the developing world. The agencies’ ideas of needs in targeted communities can often be far away from the reality of the needs of the people from these communities. The international development institutions have traditionally focused on

addressing economic needs through poverty alleviation efforts, which has risked neglecting other types of needs, such as social, political and environmental needs.

Besides critiques towards the way Western development institutions and governments shape and implement development initiatives, post-development theories also serve as a critique against the dynamics of neoliberalism that has been shaping the world order since its emergence almost forty years ago. Among the consequences of neoliberalism are a concentration of wealth among few shareholders, mass exclusion from formal employment and an expansion of the informal sector, erosion of wages and social rights, as well as a liberation of the globalized markets with fatal consequences for those who cannot keep up with the savage competition (Corragio 2011).

In a world system driven by neoliberalist forces, it has become increasingly difficult for rural small-scale producers to compete in a global market characterized by low trade barriers and cheap import products. That is why alternative ways of organizing producing activities have gained adherence among marginalized and impoverished groups in the society, ways that have the ability to increase their well-being. These groups are seeking to cover their material, as well as their social and cultural needs, through the creation of new productive relations that do not reproduce the inequalities brought by enterprises that follow the capitalist logic. The traditional capitalist enterprise seeks to earn a maximized profit, which stays in the hands of capital owners. In these enterprises, the decision-making process is concentrated in the hands of few, and the rest are employees who follow orders in change for their salary (Singer 2008).

Solidarity Economy represents a new economic logic, and the types of initiatives that follow this ideology have emerged as viable alternatives to marginalized groups in the society.

Solidarity Economy can be described as organizations that are created by groups of people that seek to create economic activities and job opportunities based on solidarity, reciprocity and cooperative relations (Gaiger 1991). There are countless of forms of initiatives that follow ideas of the Solidarity Economy, including, but not limited to social economy enterprises, local initiatives, collectives, community enterprises and cooperatives. Although the Solidarity Economy represents an umbrella term that can be applied to different types of organizations and enterprises, their main characteristics are that they are prioritizing social and environmental objectives over economic objectives. These organizations also have commonly among their objectives to construct new social and working relations that do not reproduce the inequalities caused by the existing capitalist system (Corragio 2011). They operate under a social logic of assuring a reproduction of an increased life quality to its member and their communities. According to Paul Singer, enterprises under the Solidarity Economy also aim at transforming economic relations towards a working environment that favors cooperation and equity as opposed to competition, hierarchy and individualism (Singer 2009).

Solidarity Economy initiatives are organized by a democratic participation of the community in the decision-making process. These initiatives follow the principles of equality of rights, responsibilities and opportunities of all their participants (Singer 2009). This involves the direct participation of the community in the decision-making process, which can have important impacts on the civil society. When an increased amount of people is part of the decision-making process of a society, the needs and desires of a larger part of the population will most likely be respected through the activities of the enterprise.

In the context of rural indigenous communities, Solidarity Economy has been described as organizations that are created and function around goods of common property, and represent a way of organizing collectively to achieve common objectives that are governed by their own regulations (Toledo y Espejel 2014). Because of the nature of these enterprises, they have the capability of contributing to the well-being of indigenous community by being self-managed and sustainable. This is in particular relevant in indigenous communities which historically have been repressed economically, politically and socially by the government and other external actors. Proponents of the Solidarity Economy model have been promoting its benefits in indigenous communities through three particular abilities. Their activities contribute to the well-being of the whole community, they pursue a plurality of objectives beyond material needs, and their cultural aspects align with the indigenous traditions of the communities (Peredo & McLean 2013).

The Solidarity Economy enterprises have also been studied through its relevance with the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir*. Through his work, Gudynas (2011) explores the concept of *Buen Vivir* and how solidarity enterprises seem to align with this concept, which represents a radical change from the cultural base of development and its institutional framework. *Buen Vivir* encompasses the worldviews of Mesoamerican and Andean groups and can be translated into “good living”. The idea behind *Buen Vivir* hinges on a well-being beyond the material, which constantly seeks harmony between the social, ecological and spiritual life (Fuentes-Gonzalez 2016). This concept focuses on aspects of well-being such as the community, sustainable environment and promoting local cultures, which serves a radically different approach to the sense of development mentioned in sections above.

In Chiapas, we can find similar ideas in the concept *lequil cuxlejal*. It configures in the comprehensive worldview of the Tzeltal Mayans and means good life. *Lequil cuxlejal* promotes values such as indigenous autonomy and the recognition of every living being. To the Tzeltales, it means living a life in harmony with each other as human beings, as well as with the nature (Fuentes-González 2016). The good life does consist in having the basic needs covered, such as material and social needs, as well as their cultural, political and spiritual needs. This concept thus goes beyond the material well-being that is often linked with traditional development. The Tzeltales believe that they will reach *lequil cuxlejal* once there is harmony in every aspect of their lives. It appears then, that these indigenous peoples' worldview represents a critique of development itself, as Escobar(1992) suggests with the similar term, *Buen Vivir*, that he claims serves as a “deconstruction of the western idea of development, as based on economic growth and commodification of natural resources, overcoming its colonial implications.”

While some claim that Solidarity Economy represents an alternative way of development, other scholars (Corragio 2011, Acosta 2013) draw on the work of Arturo Escobar that makes a distinction between alternative development and alternatives to development, in where the latter actually seeks to reject the current system of development. In this case, the Solidarity Economy is seen as an alternative that is not compatible with development in the neoliberal sense. As the abovementioned post-development literature claims, development as we know it focuses on economic growth as its main objective, which has shown insufficient in addressing the needs of the majority of the people. An alternative to development suggests a detanglement from the neoliberal development system, so that values such as community, cooperation, social and environmental well-being come before increased economic growth and material wealth.

Although an emphasize on local initiatives that promote indigenous culture, collaboration, spirituality have the ability of benefiting indigenous communities, a total rejection of “development” can risk hinder creation of important products and services, as well as infrastructure to the communities. Moreover, resisting the system will require the local community's capacity to provide all goods and services needed, which today seem quite impossible. Considering the level of interconnectedness the globalization has arrived at, people even in the most rural areas are, used, and even depended upon, products or services originating from outside. This exemplifies how initiatives that follow the Solidarity Economy can be seen both as alternative developments and alternatives to development itself.

From the existing literature on the Solidarity Economy initiatives, there seems to be an overall agreement on their importance and on their role in indigenous communities in sustaining endogenous development practices and valuing an indigenous epistemology (Gaiger 1999; Haugh 2006; Corragio 2011; Hoinle et al 2013; Kumbambu 2014; Giovannini 2016). While there has been made a noticeable number of studies exploring the possible contributions of these types of enterprises in indigenous communities, few empirical studies have reflected upon the different dynamics and social relations in the broad variety of indigenous societies that exist. Studies have often treated an indigenous people as a unit of analysis and this fails to reflect on how different groups within the collective might perceive the outcomes of Solidarity Economy initiatives differently. In order to understand if these types of initiatives represent a viable and sustainable alternative to achieving well-being of different groups of individuals in indigenous communities, studies through a gender perspective is necessary.

Hoinle et al (2013) explore the processes of women's empowerment through the Solidarity Economy in the favela of Rio de Janeiro. They study the processes through four different dimensions; economic, personal, sociopolitical and spatial empowerment, claiming that in the existing literature on empowerment, the spatial dimension has gained little or no attention. The fact that it was incorporated as a significant part of their study is due to the study's inductive approach. This illustrates the importance of adapting the research and its concepts to the particular context, which is also crucial to my own study. Their study showcases how women in the favela have managed to gain a certain degree of power in strategic actions in order to become decision-making actors. Through their fieldwork, they discovered that the spatial factor represented a significant barrier to participating in the formal labor market for many women living in the favela. Solidarity Economy enterprises have enabled the women towards becoming decision-making actors, both within their family and their community. Being involved in cooperatives have contributed the women with more leverage to negotiate the price of their services, which illustrates an increased recognition by the society of what they are doing. It was further observed that participating in a cooperative allows the women to contribute to the family income, which has resulted in an increased autonomy and importance of the role in the family. This challenges established gender roles that traditionally involves a masculine head of family that makes the important decisions. Vazquez et al (2016) are also exploring the correlation between empowerment and the Solidarity Economy, in which they conclude that mechanisms such as job stability, low interest microcredits and gender-equality policies have the ability to foster economic empowerment. They claim that these empowering mechanisms contribute to generate prosperity and increased well-being into indigenous communities.

Although some authors promote the Solidarity Economy model as a tool to achieve women's empowerment (Hoinle et al. 2013; Hillenkamp 2015), there exist few studies that explore the possible relation between these types of initiatives and women's empowerment in the context of indigenous communities. In many parts of the developing world, indigenous women are facing persistent social and ideological constraints that limit their inclusion in decision-making activities, agriculture and entrepreneurship (Meier 2016). To many women, participating individually in the market in order to earn profit has traditionally shown quite challenging. An increasing number of women have therefore sought after alternative ways of engaging with the economy. Participating through the Solidarity Economy has allowed for rural women in general to increase their income, as well as their well-being (Hillenkamp 2015). Michaela Giovannini agrees with the potential benefits of community enterprises to indigenous women by claiming they have the ability to “sustain the empowerment of the weakest social sectors like indigenous women, who suffer a condition of double discrimination” (Giovannini 2012, 292).

The Solidarity Economy model seems to be an alternative in the process of empowering women in general. There are, nevertheless, few studies that explore the role of local initiatives that follow the Solidarity Economy logic, in empowering women in indigenous communities.

My contribution

There seems to be no doubt about the importance of women's participation in the economy. This fosters, among others, a more humane development and a cooperative work environment. As Clark(2013) claims, women are essential for both local and global

development. However, the use of the term empowerment has been widely contested, and it is necessary to elaborate a relevant meaning of women's empowerment that involves the collaboration of indigenous people, and in my study case, Tzeltals.

First I aim to make a methodological contribution via a participatory adaptation of the concept of empowerment to the lived experience of Tzeltal women in Chiapas. I will draw from the work of Ruth Nicols, Linda T. Smith and Giles Mohan, mentioned above, to develop a way of understanding empowerment in this context. This methodology will add to ongoing discussions in the literature on collaborative and participatory methodologies about how to approach indigenous communities in generating concepts. I will explore if the existing terms and concepts about empowerment are relevant to my findings about women's empowerment in the Tzeltal communities. In doing so, I will draw on the existing literature on women's empowerment as a starting point, to understand the particular case of the processes of empowerment in Tzeltal Mayan communities. Comparing my findings to the existing framework will give an understanding to whether an institutionalized and “technical” term such as empowerment holds validity in indigenous communities that hold significantly different epistemologies.

While participatory methods are an important part of my research, I take into consideration their shortcomings mentioned above, such as that research itself is a Western concept that implies a hierarchy between me as the researcher and the Tzeltals as the participants. I acknowledge that I am a researcher formed and socialized by institutions that have trained me in a particular way to analyze information and produce knowledge. My manner of

conducting research is naturally formed by this, and in various ways this challenges Tzeltal epistemology.

My thesis will also contribute to the written work on empowerment. As I have explored through the literature about empowerment above, women's empowerment initiatives have gained much attention in the field of development for their ability to have positive impacts in marginalized communities. I agree with the importance of facilitating women's abilities to decide and being actively involved in economic, as well as social and political matters. However, I call for the need of an elaborated concept of empowerment that can be relevant in contexts where the people hold different worldviews. With an adapted understanding of women's empowerment, development initiatives created to increase the empowerment of women should be measured towards this adapted concept. This can have the ability to generate more adjusted indicators that takes into account the local people's own perceptions about needs. Letting the locals participate in shaping indicators used in programs that target them, can be a factor that contributes to more efficient efforts in addressing their struggles and increasing their well-being (Goebel 1997). My work is in conversation with literature written on women's empowerment in different contexts, such as Honile et al and Afshar et al, who study who really benefit from these initiatives, and they also promote the intersectionality method to fully get a grasp of realities and social relations in the communities without limitations from presupposed categories. With my thesis, I am looking at empowerment in the context of indigenous women, taking into account the importance of intersectionality.

Another goal of my thesis is to make a contribution to the gender aspect of the Solidarity Economy. Drawing on the literature on the Solidarity Economy model and its benefits to

indigenous communities, as well as studies on these types of enterprises' abilities to empower women, it becomes relevant to explore the impact of these types of enterprises in the context of indigenous women. Considering that women often face additional struggles in indigenous communities, my study goes beyond contributing to the literature on the impact of enterprises of the Solidarity Economy. I seek to understand whether and how the outcomes of these types of initiatives also are beneficial to women in indigenous communities, and if these benefits can be manifested through an increased empowerment of these women. I am exploring the role of Solidarity Economy initiatives on women's empowerment in Tzeltal Mayan communities, acknowledging that I will need to adapt empowerment to concepts that correspond to their own worldview.

Research design and methodology

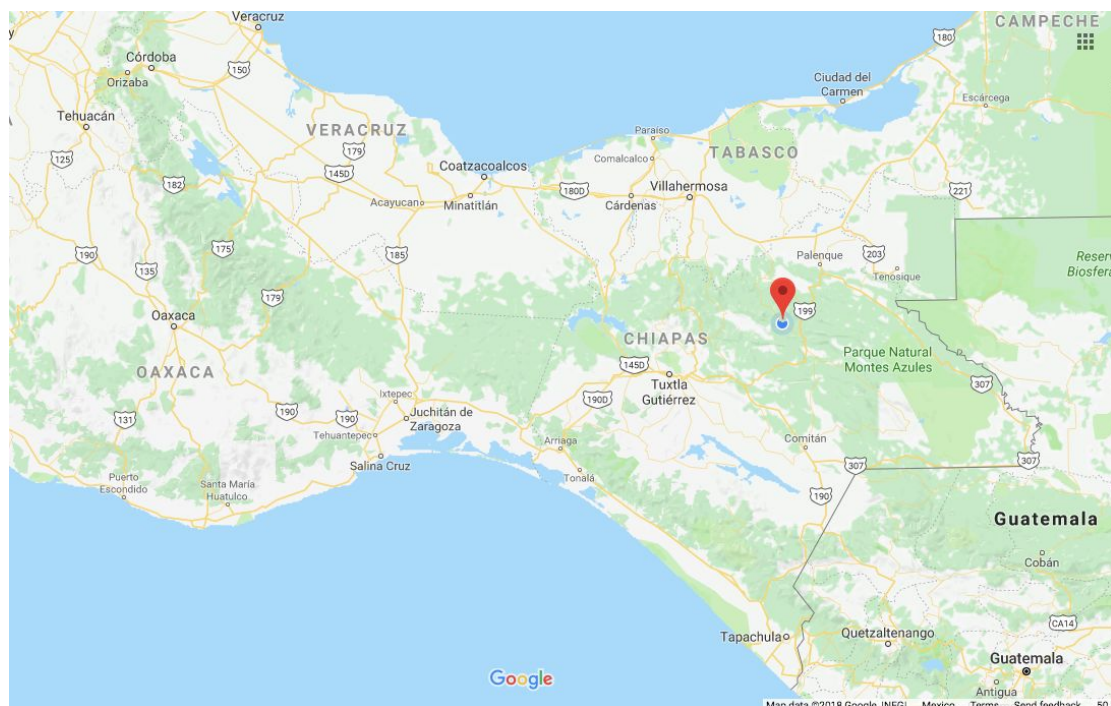
Research Design

The purpose of this study is to get an understanding of how women's empowerment plays out in Tzeltal communities in Chiapas, Mexico, and further, to explore the role of Solidarity Economy initiatives on this process. To be able to get important insights into the various dynamics and implications of empowerment in these communities, and to explore the impacts of cooperatives, my research was carried out as an ethnographic study which consisted in participant observations and in-depth interviews. Another component of this research is the analyzing of secondary sources. The unit of analysis in this study is the indigenous group Tzeltal Mayans in northeastern Chiapas, with a main focus on Tzeltal women. The fieldwork was carried out in a period of two months, from August to October 2018.

Fieldwork location

My fieldwork was based out of the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón, located in the municipality of Chilón, in the northeastern part of Chiapas, also known as the northern jungle region- *selva norte*. The Mission of Bachajón comprehend three civil associations; Center for Education Support to Communities (CAEC), Center for Integral Formation for Indigenous Promoters (CEFIPI) and Center for Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC). Their work is dedicated to the promotion of social processes, and well as economic, educative, pastoral and human rights processes through 28 different projects in Tzeltal communities in the region.

Figure 1: Location of the municipality of Chilón, Chiapas.



Google Maps, Accessed September 7, 2018.

The mission has served as a bridging point between researchers and Tzeltal Mayans, as the mission has been receiving individuals that conduct research on their site for many years. Maintaining the well-being of the indigenous communities is a priority when the mission is receiving researchers and others who wish to work with the mission. It has been important to ensure that the researcher holds accountability to their participants, which is why every researcher who arrives has to engage with one of the different projects of the mission that serves the good of the Tzeltal communities. I got the chance to collaborate in two different projects related to women based out of the Center for Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC). One project with

Antsetic, a women's group that promotes community development projects, and with *Xapontic*, a Solidarity Economy initiative for women.

Being involved in these projects gave me access to the rural Tzeltal communities, which very often were hours away, and would have been impossible to arrive to without travelling with the vehicles of the mission. Arriving at a rural community with representatives from the mission, gave me the advantage of gaining an immediate trust among the locals. Arriving in the rural communities with representatives from the mission also made the Tzeltal women identify me as part of the mission, which I acknowledge may have affected the women's answers and interactions with me. It might be challenging for them to tell the truth about some of the community development projects that they did not find beneficial, knowing that I was «part of the mission». Nevertheless, the continuous work of the Jesuit mission in Chiapas for more than 60 years has allowed for a good reputation and trust among the local population. This enabled me to establish good relations and confidence in the communities I visited, which was important for a successful completion of my fieldwork.

Methodology

Through the literature review, I examined participatory and decolonizing methodologies and their possibilities of empowering local communities and promoting indigenous knowledge. As my thesis aims at understanding empowerment through indigenous people's own worldview, my research incorporates a participatory methodology, through which the participants played important roles in generating the data, as well as describing terms and concepts according to their own worldview. To address the issues related to the asymmetrical power relation between the

researcher and the local participants in the communities, being reflective and trying to minimize these imbalances were points from decolonizing methodologies that I strived to achieve during the whole research process. My thesis follows an inductive reasoning, in which I use the observations and data collected from my fieldwork to shape tentative concepts of women's empowerment. Although this research process have been a challenging task, as I have been working to get an understanding and implementing different epistemologies, I make attempts at letting the Tzeltal women's own experiences and perceptions form the concepts around their empowerment process.

Research Method

Although this study follows an inductive logic, I took use of established concepts about empowerment to help me elaborate discussion points before going into the field. I had emphasized on the division of empowerment proposed by Kabeer(1999), who divides the process into resources, agencies and achievements. The resources acquired by women, either material or social, can help them having an agency to make decisions that will lead them to concrete achievements. These served as a starting point when creating themes to discuss when I got the opportunity to speak with Tzeltales at greater length. I wished to understand the empowerment process in detail with the Tzeltal women through their own perceptions. I started my research with this working theory, acknowledging that it would be subject to modifications as I learnt more about the existing social relations and women's realities in the Tzeltal communities. Through observations and data collected during my fieldwork, I was able to work

towards a redefined concept of empowerment that is more adequate to the reality of the Tzeltal people, and that takes into account their worldview.

Analysis of secondary sources is an important component of my findings. Through my project with the women's group *Antsetic*, I got access to very useful documents. *Antsetic* counts on two Tzeltal employees and represents one of the 28 projects of the mission. The group coordinates community development programs with a focus on women in Tzeltal communities. Their projects involve agricultural development initiatives, sustainable housing, ecological initiatives, microcredits, workshops and other types of collective work. I was in charge of systemizing all the reports from their monitoring, evaluative or initial visits in the different communities of the projects. The aim of the systematization was to get an understanding of what had benefited the communities in the previous community projects implemented, what lessons could be made and what could be implemented in the future. Having access to these documents served me with valuable information about Tzeltal women's experiences and behaviour. The information in the reports helped me to understand the way these women were thinking about several topics, such as gender roles, the collective projects they were doing with the help of the mission, and other personal or community concerns. It also gave me a useful indicator of which types of questions I could raise while I was in conversation with the women, and how I could express myself to get understood. The information about how the women felt and expressed themselves was important in the shaping of the Tzeltal inspired empowerment that I am describing in the next sections.

Another important component of my fieldwork consisted of participant observations. This was a crucial element to my study, as spending time with the locals in their communities

enabled me to get a unique insight of the Tzeltal culture, to get a deeper understanding of their epistemology, as well as their social relations and behavior relevant to women's empowerment. Besides conducting interviews, I joined community reunions, religious ceremonies, as well as taking part of daily activities with the families I visited. As I was working at the offices of the mission in Chilon during the weeks, I always tried to spend my weekends in a different rural community, living with a Tzeltal family. These experiences increased my understandings of this indigenous society, making me more familiar to the Tzeltal way of living and their culture. Working with and living close to the Tzeltales for a period of two months allowed me to get a notion of tendencies and patterns in behaviors of Tzeltales, as well as processes concerning women's empowerment.

The findings of my study are qualitative, as I conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews to get an understanding of the meaning of empowerment to the women in these communities. Through semi-structured conversations, I raised questions related to women's perceptions of their roles that enabled me to get a deeper understanding of these women's aspirations. Examples of topics that were included in these conversations were the woman's role in her household and in her community, her economic, political and social needs, her goals and her actions to achieve them. With the data I obtained from the fieldwork, I will in upcoming sections of this thesis analyze my observations related to empowerment in these communities.

I interacted with all types of Tzeltal people, rural, semi-urban and with different occupations and positions in the society to be able to get an amplified and representative view of the empowering processes that women were experiencing. The participants consisted of both men and women, as in order to understand the social relations in these societies, it was necessary

to understand men's perceptions as well. I visited a total of seventeen different rural communities, completing in average at least two semi-structured conversations in each community. Although I did not have any specific requirement for the participants, I tried to talk with at least one woman that was engaged with a cooperative in her community. This was to get a notion of the reasons why they would join these types of enterprises, and if there could be made any connection to the processes of women's empowerment.

Limitations

The main challenge of this project has been to grasp a thoroughly understanding of the Tzeltal epistemology and to incorporate a way of measuring empowerment according to their beliefs. As my first objective is to get an understanding of the meaning of empowerment from Tzeltal women's point of view, it showed quite challenging to integrate my findings into this paper in a manner that respects the institutional framework. Casual accounts and reports of my observations from the Tzeltal communities are rarely seen as good contributions if they do not show any particular result, as research conducted from Western institutions ideally is designed with measurable indicators in order to prove a given point or impact. My attempts at understanding and reproducing knowledge that corresponds to different epistemologies than the western one, add on to counter-colonial research. Although a difficult task, my effort has been tentative and can hopefully shed light on this topic and its importance for future research in indigenous contexts.

Another limitation consisted in the language barrier. Although I am fluent in Spanish, a good amount of the Tzeltales in the communities I was interacting with only spoke their native

language, Tzeltal. I was able to learn some Tzeltal through language classes offered by the mission, as well as through spending time in the communities. This helped me with basic conversations, but my limited vocabulary made it difficult to hold deeper conversations. I was in many cases dependent on a translator, that most often were one of my colleagues that was present on that particular community outing. This allowed me to conduct the conversation and raise questions, as well as understanding the responses. While I was interacting and taking part of daily activities in the rural communities, getting a deeper understanding of how things were done and how social relations worked in the community became more challenging because of the language barrier. My interpretations of facial expressions and gestures were important in times where I did not understand the words said in conversations.

I also acknowledge the limitations of the scope of this particular case. Although I was able to observe certain tendencies of the process of women's empowerment in the Tzeltal Mayan communities, the process might be significantly different with other indigenous groups. Further, even if a positive correlation might be found between participating in a Solidarity Economy initiative and women's empowerment, there might be other factors that can be attributed to the empowering of women in these communities. Those can be factors such as the accessibility and the location of the cooperatives to the women, which can facilitate women's involvement with these.

Beyond the constraints caused by the differences of indigenous and western epistemologies, limited time and resources adds on to the difficulties for this research project. I could not enter the field to conduct my research until mid August. This was because of the precautionary measures advised by the Jesuit Mission, due to the Mexican elections that were

held July 1st and risked generating increased violence in the area. The time constraint impacted the quality of work I could do in the field. Not only are two months of field work not sufficient to undergo a comprehensive study. The fact that I conducted the fieldwork relatively close to the thesis' deadline, forced me to engage in the communities, analyze my findings and write up my thesis simultaneously, which undoubtedly had an impact on my capacity to fully emerge into the communities. More time spent in the communities could have broadened my knowledge and understandings about the Tzeltal people and the social relations deeper, and help me to elaborate a better way of representing my findings to be beneficial to these communities.

Historical context

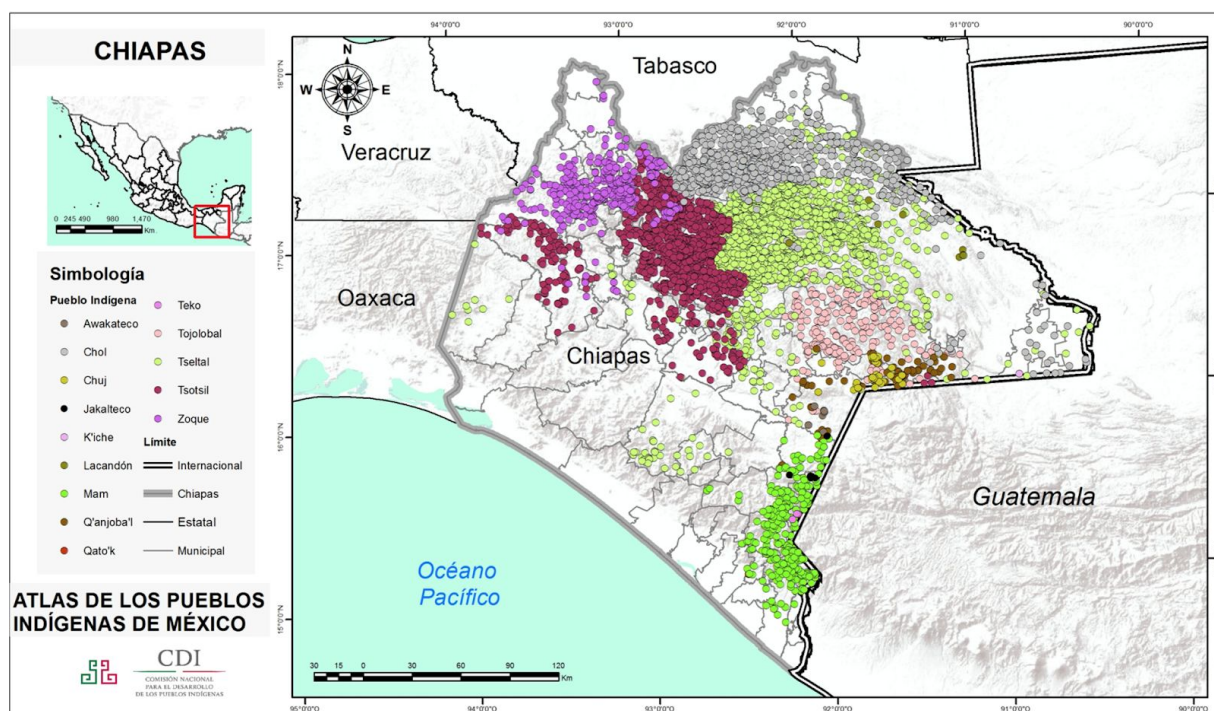
Chiapas and the indigenous struggle

Chiapas is situated in the southeastern part of Mexico, bordering the Pacific in the south and Guatemala in the east. It is known to resemble Central America more than Mexico culturally, which can be traced back to colonial time when Chiapas was part of Guatemala. It became a Mexican state first in 1824. The state remained relatively isolated from the rest of the country, as roads were only built at the end of the 19th century, and a railway connection to the Mexican capital was built at the beginning of the 20th century. Chiapas is among the most natural resource rich states in Mexico and counts on a high biodiversity. It also holds an ethnographic richness with more than thirteen different indigenous groups (CDI 2018), and is moreover, home to important Mayan archeological sites (Giovannini 2016). Chiapas' major economic activities involve corn, banana, coffee, cacao, beans, hydropower, oil and natural gas. The state is Mexico's second largest cocoa producer, and moreover, 60 percent of the country's coffee output originates from Chiapas. In 2016, 40 percent of the active population in the state was employed in the agriculture and mining sector, representing almost 13 percent of the employment in these two sectors nationally (ProMéxico 2016).

Despite holding a handful of important natural resources, Chiapas has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the country. In 2013, Chiapas' GDP per capita was 2466 USD, only 40 percent of the national GDP per capita at 5590 USD, which ranked its GDP per capita the lowest in the country (CONEVAL 2014). The state's economic poverty has often been studied in relation to its large presence of indigenous populations. Among Chiapas' population of 5.2

million people (INEGI 2015), 26 percent is considered indigenous. Fourteen different indigenous languages are spoken in Chiapas (INALI 2008), and the largest indigenous groups are the Tzotziles and the Tzeltales; both are groups within the Mayan people. In Figure 2 below, we see the location of the different indigenous groups in Chiapas. The Tzeltales are marked in light green and are mostly living in the northeast. In 2010, 27.2 percent of the inhabitants of Chiapas were said to speak an indigenous language, versus 6.7 percent on national level (INEGI 2010). Among the indigenous people, 36.5 percent do not know Spanish and only speak their native language.

Figure 2: The different indigenous groups in Chiapas



Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2018.

The large indigenous presence has characterized Chiapas, both culturally and politically. The state gained increased interest by scholars and activists after the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in which the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN, commonly known as Zapatistas) was claiming indigenous autonomy and respect for indigenous peoples' political, cultural and social rights. The group's members are composed of different indigenous groups in Chiapas, as well as some non-indigenous Mexicans. Some of the demands towards the Mexican government from their official document *The 6th Declaration of the Jungle* (EZLN 2005) are liberty, justice, work, land, food, health and independence. The resurrection by the militant group started the same day that Mexico signed the North American Trade Agreement with Canada and the United States, which has, among other, resulted in big losses for rural agriculture workers that has been competed out by cheaper agriculture products from their North American neighbors (Giovannini 2012).

As of today, the Zapatistas count on 39 autonomous communities in Chiapas that live in resistance against any government authority (Crispín and Ruiz 2010). These are governed from five administrative municipality centres known as *caracoles* that promotes alternative ways of living and doing politics. The armed group is the only provider to its members of what traditionally is seen to be public services, such as education, health and infrastructure (Castellanos 2008). The group practices its ideology of participatory democracy, in where the all member's voices are heard and all decisions are taken collectively. The indigenous way of living is promoted through their activities, contributing to maintaining and strengthening their culture.

The movement initiated by the Zapatistas also included the promotion of indigenous women's right through the Women's Revolutionary Laws that were introduced in 1993. These

laws aim at challenging indigenous women's traditional roles and their marginalization within their communities, as well as in the society. The laws represented the Zapatista women's demands towards their families, their communities and the Mexican state. Among their demands are the right to participate in matters of the community and hold leader positions, the right to work and receive salary, the right to decide her partner and the number of children, and the right to be free from violence from strangers and relatives. This movement represented the first feminist indigenous movement in Latin America (Kabeer et al. 2001). The Zapatista leader, known as Subcomandante Marcos, claimed that in fact, the first insurrection by the Zapatistas took place in March 1993, and was initiated by Zapatista women. The women's rebellion have later seemed to be neglected, as the Zapatista insurrection in 1994 gained more attention worldwide (Si Paz 2015). A focus on gender equality is among the Zapatista group's most important ideologies, which can be observed through their divisions of assignments and labor. Tasks such as cleaning and cooking, traditionally held only by women in indigenous communities in Chiapas, are held equally by both men and women in the Zapatista governed communities. The same applies in the group's armed operations, where the participation of women is of equal importance as that of men.

Since the beginning of the Zapatista movement, countless of violent clashes have taken place between federal government forces and the Zapatistas, who do not give up on their aspiration of reaching indigenous autonomy. A tentative peace between the two parts is found in the San Andrés Accords that was signed in 1996. The agreement granted, among others, respect and recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. Nevertheless, the indigenous peoples' rights seemed to be respected only on paper and not in practice by the government, that systematically

neglected their social and economic rights by initiating extractivist projects for instance (Crispín and Ruíz 2010). Although less frequent today, violent clashes still occur in the region, between the Zapatista group, government military groups and other groups that seek opportunities to destabilise the region and obtain power and economic gains.

History of the Tzeltales

The history of the Tzeltales has been characterized by constant land dispossession, efforts of dominations, slavery and exploitation by foreign and Mexican landowners. This has turned the Tzeltales into a people that is constant in fight for its autonomy, defending its territories, its culture and its work (Fernandez 2014). The Tzeltal people emerged as a distinct group from Mayan peoples around the 12th century in the northern jungle region in Chiapas. From when the Spanish colonists arrived in the 16th century, they put the Tzeltales to work in very poor conditions on *fincas* (big farm estates) owned by the Spanish. Discontent with their labor conditions, as well as with the Spanish Royalty, the Tzeltales, together with Tzotziles and Choles, initiated what has been known as the Tzeltal Rebellion of 1712. The armed insurrection had as objective to claim the rights of a dignified life to all Mayans that had been suffering from hunger, misery, submission and epidemics. By the following year, the federal forces had succeeded at ceasing the rebellion, and the poor conditions of the indigenous groups remained almost unchanged (Martínez-Loera 2011).

In the 19th century, the Mexican government offered the land that was initially held by indigenous groups to external investors for low prices. By the end of the century, the Tzeltales had lost control over their land, and many of them were forced back into slavery like labor in the

fincas. From the 1970s, initiated after the 17th Congress of Mother Earth, the Tzeltales started the processes of taking back the land that was previously owned by them. The *selva norte* region of Chiapas, with a majority of Tzeltales, underwent the process of reconfiguration of land during decades (Maurer 1984). The land that originally had been held by the Tzeltales, had been turned into *fincas* and represented economic and social exploitation. Towards the end of the 20th century, the Tzeltales finally achieved to regain 90% of their territory (Rodríguez 2010).

The main activity of the Tzeltales has traditionally been in agriculture. Their most important subsistence crops are corn and beans, which they have been growing since their origins. After foreign landowners arrived in Chiapas and turned the sugar cane plantations into coffee productions, this practice was implemented by the Tzeltal farmers as well. The Tzeltales were first growing coffee as laborers for the owners of the *fincas*, and later, they started growing coffee on their own land for both consumption and for sale to distributors, or so called *coyotes*. Those are the coffee buyers in the region that purchase coffee beans from smallholder growers and sell it for a much higher price to coffee producers, often taking advantage of the impoverished Tzeltal coffee farmers.

Today an estimated 83 percent of the indigenous population in Chiapas is dedicated to auto consuming agriculture. This means that a majority of these families are not receiving an income for their main activity. According to a survey conducted by ECOSUR, the average distribution of the Tzeltal family's income is as follows: 48 percent from governmental programs, 33 percent from agricultural activities (coffee as the principal), 12 percent from remittances, and 7 percent from savings or loans (Manos Unidas 2011). These numbers might be an indication of that although the Tzeltales are dedicated to agricultural activities in a region that

is rich with coffee, cacao, beans, banana and other natural resources, only a small part is grown as cash crops by the Tzeltal farmers, which results in low household incomes. The most profitable crop is coffee, still, the majority of smallholder coffee growers are suffering from low prices of the raw material triggered by a volatile international coffee market (Pitts 2018).

Tzeltal epistemology

Tzeltales define themselves as *batsil c'op* which means “those of the original word.” The concept is of Mayan origin, and its oral heritage is recreated in Tzeltal customs and practices of knowledge (Martínez-Loera 2011). Tzeltal epistemology is characterized for its strong sense of community belonging, as opposed to the Western sense of individualism. Their relationships within their cosmovision have favored the sociocultural development of the Tzeltales. The Mayans and Tzeltales can be understood through their social structures which are based on their respect for the environment, supreme beings and their ancestors (Maurer 2000). One of the main features of their worldview is that they constantly seek harmony between the members of their community and its environment (Martínez-Loera 2011). The importance of development through the community is result of their close relation with the earth, their ancestors and the everyday life activities.

Their cosmovision is composed of *chul chan* - cosmos, *lum quinal* - Mother Earth and *c'atimbac* - underworld (Juarez Bolaños 2009). The equilibrium and the balance between the three elements are compensated by the protectors of the universe- the sun, the moon and the mountains. To the Tzeltales, true good lies in life itself and in all that is necessary to maintain a good life, specially agricultural products. They consider that the protection of Mother Earth from

supreme beings, through rain and a good climate, are essential. That is why worshipping to different Saints and God before the harvesting of a crop initiates, are among important rituals to the Tzeltals (Maurer 1984). Ceremonies where Mother Earth receives blessings through food, drinks and prayers are not an uncommon way to inaugurate a new crop. This is done to thank Mother Earth for the nutriment that she has given them, and further deliver her blessings to receive more nutriments in the future. Resources other than from Mother Earth are seen as gifts that needs to be taken care of and administered by everyone, as opposed to treat them as products that are used to enrich a few.

Gender roles in Tzeltal society

Traditional gender roles are deep anchored in the Tzeltal society. The traditional division of labor in a Tzeltal home consist of women working in the kitchen and taking care of the children, while men work in the fields (Maurer 1984). At times, women also helps out in the fields, especially during harvest. From a young age, girls are taught to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. The women act according to the expectations of what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave. Expectations of staying at home with the children and preparing the food, make women in most communities “trapped” in these roles. Moreover, the men are usually the ones who make decisions, which has generated a society that views women’s position less important.

As if the Tzeltals and the Mayans were not already in a marginalized position by the government and other external actors, in addition, the Tzeltal woman also finds herself

marginalized in her community and in her family. A woman expressed in 1995 the following about being an indigenous woman:

In the majority of the indigenous communities, the voice of women are not heard(...) Hits, insults, sexual abuse, abandon and fear shape the spaces of us women, depriving us from our capacity to love, because many of us are forced into marrying our husbands. The women, besides doing labor that is indispensable to the family, we work in the corn fields, we work as much as the men, but by the end of the day nobody serves us the food, no one respects our value and our work doesn't have value, and no one trusts in our capacity to decide (Si Paz 2015, 47)

The traditional gender roles have an important impact on women in the Tzeltal society. Behaviour that creates inequalities between men and women are implemented and reproduced since childhood in this patriarchal society, causing a vicious circle in where the women themselves have learned to believe that they are worth less. The gender traditions have limited the women to certain tasks, without any opportunities to participate in economic or political activities (Crispín and Ruíz 2010). It seems evident that the situations the women are facing are part of structural issues of marginalization and poverty that indigenous people face in general. It might therefore be useful to have gotten an understanding of the historical context of the Tzeltales in Chiapas to understand the persistent and violent struggles of the women.

Indigenous groups' struggles still persist in Chiapas today, and many of them are perhaps more socioeconomically marginalized than ever. The indigenous women are probably worst off. Although few of the many efforts made by the Mexican government have helped to better the situation for indigenous peoples (Giovannini 2012), indigenous communities have gained increased attention from other actors. Social activists and researchers, as well as development

organizations and local non-profits, all share interests in exploring ways to better the life conditions of the indigenous peoples in the region. A combination of Chiapas' history, its political, economic and social struggles, as well as the natural and ethnic richness of the state, has turned it into a popular site for development initiatives. As follows, different NGOs and religious organizations have played important role in establishing development project in the region.

The Jesuit Mission of Bachajón

The Mission of Bachajón was founded by jesuit priests and monks that arrived in the municipality of Chilón, Chiapas in 1958. Along with their religious evangelization mission, they also committed to better the life conditions of the Tzeltal people through community projects, such as installing drinking water, building schools and health centers and initiating agricultural projects. Throughout the next decades, they have engaged in a wide range of activities and projects to promote the indigenous culture and development, as well as indigenous socio political rights. The mission was for instance among the supporters of the peace dialogues between the Zapatistas and the Federal Government in 1996.

Today, the Mission of Bachajón is present in an area of an estimated 5.000 km², and its 28 different community development projects reach a total of 622 indigenous communities from the 5 following municipalities: Chilón, Sitalá, Yajalón, Pantelhó and Ocosingo. The Tzeltal Mayans are the majority in all the municipalities. Other Mayan groups in this region are the Tzotziles, the Ch'oles and the Tojolabales. Among the mission's objectives is to accompany and strengthen the Tzeltal communities of the region through defending and promoting their rights, language and culture.

In addition to jesuits, the participants of the mission consist of laics, *mestizos* (non-indigenous) and Tzeltales. Since its origins, the mission has evolved from representing a small group of missionaries with a limited knowledge of the Tzeltal epistemology, to represent a dynamic intercultural church in the region with thousands of local pastors, both ordained and laics. The mission has committed to support Tzeltales with different community service charges, both civil and religious. The Mission of Bachajón has thus played an important role in the intercultural dialogue between Tzeltales and *mestizos*, which has fostered cooperation and tolerance in the region (Crispín and Ruíz 2010).

Because of the issues of high levels of marginalization of the Tzeltal people in the region, the mission decided to concentrate its efforts in various focal points, which are called processes. Among their different processes, we find catechesis of kids and adults, the formation of local deacons, as well as projects that promotes reconciliation in the communities, health, gender equality, spirituality, taking care of Mother Earth, and the strengthening of cultural and social organization. The mission has during 60 years accompanied the Tzeltal communities in the region with the elaboration and the implementation of these different processes, with the objective to promote development and strengthen the social fabric of the communities. Through the mission's activities, there has been a drive to respect and enhance the Tzeltal culture and way of organizing as a mechanism of claiming back Tzeltal territory (Crispín and Ruiz 2010).

The mission operates through three different civil associations, Center for Education Support to Communities (CAEC), Center for Integral Formation for Indigenous Promoters- (CEFIPI) and Center for Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC). The mission's organizational strategy has been elaborated in a way that responds to the necessities in the Tzeltal communities in the

region. The mission's work is today divided into four different *yomoles*, in which each pole leads different strategic projects that addresses a topic issue in the communities. Those are *Yomol A'tel* (Solidarity Economy projects), *Yomol jP'ijubtesel* (Intercultural education), *Yomol Ayinel* (Social projects), *Yomol Ch'uhunel* (Autonomous church) and *Yomol C'op* (communication projects).

Yomol A'tel (Together we work, we walk, we dream) is the name of the Mission's group of small enterprises that follow principles of the Solidarity Economy. The group describes itself as an "integrator that accompanies the development of each of their social and solidarity enterprises. It develops as a social corporate, understanding the turn of each of the companies with the aim of generating social property, governance and business efficiency" (Yomol A'tel 2018). These social enterprises are working to create products and services beneficial to their communities, and moreover, they are committed to social justice and to promote indigenous culture through their work. Since its beginning in 2011, *Yomol A'tel* has supported different economic projects in Tzeltal communities that are contributing to autonomy, dignity and well-being to establish sustainable alternatives to the current economic logic. The mission supports the cooperatives within *Yomol A'tel* through trainings and workshops, educating and employing people, different services through external personnel (such as marketing and commercialization with other cities), as well as economic fundings.

The Solidarity Economy enterprises under the *Yomol A'tel* group consist of are a cooperative that produces coffee and soaps, an enterprise that toasts and commercializes the coffee, a coffee shop with various locations, a women's cooperative that produces soap, and another cooperative that commercialize honey. As of today, these enterprises count on

employees, some of them are also associates, but among their objectives is to reach a point in which every employee will also be an associate, in order to be a cooperative in the strict sense. The organizational structure of *Yomol A'tel* favors democratic processes, in where they strive to achieve that all decisions are made collectively. The work of these Solidarity Economy enterprises has, among other, enabled more than 250 individual producers of coffee and honey to work together towards a more fair income and an increased well-being to its members (Yomol A'tel 2017).

Gender perspective in the projects of the mission

In the beginning, the work of the mission was exclusively directed towards men. Only men could hold leader positions (coordinators, priest and deacons) in the communities. At one point, the mission realized the importance of giving attention to women as well. In 1993, the different projects of the mission started to incorporate *coordinadoras* (women representatives) in the communities. This position enabled women to receive formation and capacitation through courses and workshops, which they would then bring back to their communities. Moreover, women started to participate more in public spaces such as the church and in communal reunions. Introducing a gender focus in the projects of the mission has brought enthusiasm and motivation to many women. It has represented important opportunities for many women of being more active in their communities (Crispín and Ruiz 2010).

Today, the women's group *Antsetic* represents a part of the intercultural education pole in the mission, in collaboration with the civil association CEDIAC. This group is committed to promote women's rights and empowerment in Tzeltal communities through capacity building and

development projects. The model that they follow for their interventions in local communities is called *Hogar Tzeltal Sustentable* - Sustainable Tzeltal home, and consists of four principal poles: health, production through natural resources, organization and harmony, and self-managed processes. One of my contributions to the mission was with the group *Antsetic*. Besides accompanying the group in workshops, reunions and production sessions in the rural communities, I also elaborated a systematization of all the community development projects implemented in the region since 2010.

As part of the process of the Solidarity Economy initiatives within *Yomol A'tel*, an own space promoting the role of women was proposed in 2011. This was realized through *Xapontic*, a social enterprise that contributes to the participation and the inclusion of women within the processes of the Solidarity Economy. *Xapontic* is dedicated to the elaboration of artisanal soaps with honey produced in the region. The other area in which I collaborated with during my fieldwork was with the women's cooperative *Yip Antsetic*, that is connected to the Solidarity Economy enterprise *Xapontic*. The cooperative is composed of thirty seven women from five different communities that produce artisanal soaps to *Xapontic*, who is responsible of the product development and the commercialization of the soaps. *Yip Antsetic* has represented a way of promoting the inclusion and participation of women within the Solidarity Economy processes of the mission. It has allowed for Tzeltal women in the region who were previously limited to house chores, to participate in an economic activity, to gain leadership experience and to earn money for themselves (Crispín and Ruiz 2010). By earning their own income, it makes the women less dependent on their husbands, and moreover, they are more respected in their family and their community as they contribute to the household income.

Findings

Most of my interactions with the Tzeltal women subjects of this thesis happened on my visits to the different rural communities arranged by the CEDIAC- the Center of Indigenous Rights under the Jesuit mission, where I accompanied its employees in various community development projects. After having established a rapport with the groups of women in the communities, I asked some of them if they felt comfortable to have a longer conversation. The dynamic of the interviews varied greatly, some were carried out as semi-structured interviews, while others were more like casual conversations. It was important to not destroy the natural setting by abruptly imposing questions, which could have risked causing a hostile ambiance. This is why more casual conversations are important components of my data. These helped me to understand which points were important to these women by themselves taking the initiative to mention them.

I interacted with Tzeltal people from the following rural communities in the northeastern jungle region of Chiapas: Crucero San Miguel Canshanil, Jolamaltzac II, Coquite'el, Santa Cruz, La Victoria, Yax Winic, Ticanthela, Aurora, Samuel Leon Brindins, Chalamchen, San Antonio Patbaxil, Nihalté, Crucero Tiakil, Centro Ch'ich, Tim, Caracol Morelia and Caracol Roberto Barrios. These are rural communities that are often very far away from villages or cities, which is why their infrastructure, communication and access to shops and some basic goods are quite limited. For many of the people living in these communities, it is very hard to get to a town or a city. It often involves hours of walking through cornfields and dirt roads, or an unaffordable taxi-ride. The fact that these communities were far away from everything could be seen reflected

on the people, who were not used to interact with people outside of their own communities. I especially noticed this among several women that did not seem to be used to seeing people that were not from their own community. I recall a visit to the community San Antonio Patbaxil where I, after a meeting held by the women's group *Antsetic*, accompanied them for lunch. While eating, everyone was standing and chatting in groups, and I quickly noticed a group of young women eating with their head turned towards the wall, away from everyone else. I asked my colleagues the reason for their behavior. Some Tzeltal men beside me responded that “the women are very shy, they never go out and see other people because it is a very remote community.” When I later tried to communicate with these young women, they looked at me with a shy smile and did not show any interest in talking with an outsider like me. The remoteness and often lack of connection with the “outside”, were common characteristics of the Tzeltal communities that I visited.

Another group of women with whom I interacted with were the Tzeltales who I worked with at the CEDIAC office in Chilón. These women were in general more open towards other people and can be considered as more urban, since they lived in the towns of Chilón (around 8.000 habitants) or Bachajón (around 5.000 habitants). They represented a group of somewhat educated Tzeltal women; all spoke Spanish and had some level of education. Since these women were used to be around people from other cities and countries, they were much more open to speak to people outside their communities than most of the women I had met in the rural communities.

Through one of my projects at the CEDIAC, where I was working with the women's group *Antsetic* helping them to systemize their development projects, I got access to useful

documents that also served as sources for my analysis. These include reports of the monitoring and the evaluation of all the different projects, meetings, courses, trainings and assemblies that were held by the women's group since 2010. These reports are written by employees of *Antsetic*, and are part of the documentation necessary for their donors and financial institutions, as well as they serve for internal use. These reports included detailed descriptions from the community visits made by representatives of the women's group, such as how the projects were going, challenges, and how the women were feeling about the different projects. These documents served me with an amplified view for my analysis, as I got a deeper picture of the social relations in the Tzeltal communities.

Individual and collective empowerment

As explored through the literature review, empowerment on an individual level can refer to a process which starts with obtaining consciousness (Freire 1968). When a woman is conscious about her life situation of limitations, she proceeds to actions to overcome the barriers of her participation and her decision-making abilities. This process of empowerment is often initiated by a particular event in a woman's life which makes her more aware of her situation, and that leads her to take actions. I observed this through various cases with the Tzeltal women. These were women that found themselves living lives with significant limitations. Cases such as violent husbands and urgent economic needs were reasons for the Tzeltal women that I interacted with, to take actions to empower themselves. This happened on an individual level, as these women did not necessarily share the same personal experience with a other women in their

community. Rather, their experiences affected them individually, often in their family sphere, and they were facing individual choices of taking actions to be able to gain some power.

A Tzeltal woman told me about how she, after years of being in a physically abusive relationship which had limited her to stay at home even though she had wanted to work, decided to leave the relationship. She had suffered many years with this man, and making the decision of leaving him was not easy at all. Not only did she have five children with the man, but he had held extensive control over her life for a long time. After she had managed to leave the man, as well as filing a lawsuit against him, her life started to change drastically. She started to work for the first time in her life, being able to maintain herself and her kids economically, as well as spending her days doing activities outside her home, which she expresses is very rewarding to her. The steps taken towards leaving the abusive relationship were actions taken by no other person than herself and can therefore be best viewed as a process of individual empowerment. It was not a shared experience with several women in her community, as the event only affected her personally. Now, if several women share similar experiences of abusive husbands and limiting gender norms within a community, we could observe collective actions towards empowerment.

Facing the challenges of unequal gender norms in the Tzeltal society, many women have started to take actions to address these issues. Actions that these women take are often done in collectives, consisting of women who share the same lived experiences of injustice, often related to traditional gender norms. Unlike individual empowerment, which might be the reaction of one particular event or personal experience, collective empowerment can often be characterized as a process of accumulated shared experiences of many women. Empowerment on a collective level aims at generating a process which represents a transformation of the social structures. Processes

of collective empowerment can manage to change unequal gender relations in a society (Charlier et al. 2007).

In many indigenous societies, the community plays a central role. It is not only their home, the community also represents a collective space in where its members often share beliefs, jobs, and the sense of being part of something together. An important part of the Tzeltal epistemology is a person's sense of community belonging, in where the people constantly seeks to find harmony with the family and within the community (Fuentes-González 2016). Feeling harmony through being part of a collective is often more important that the sense of being an individual. The logic of community to the Tzeltales can be seen reflected through their ways of organizing and working. During my visits in the communities, I often witnessed groups of men or women gathered to perform different tasks or worked on projects together. This can explain why empowerment on a collective level is in particular relevant to study in this context.

Empowerment can thus be studied as an individual and as a collective process. Individual, when the process concerns one woman and her actions taken to gain power. Collective, when a group of women share similar experiences of lack of choices, and make strategic actions in order to be able to change the asymmetries of power. In this analysis I have chosen to not emphasize on the division of individual and collective women's empowerment. I agree with Kate Young (1993) and believe these two can be interconnected and need to be studied and understood together. In the Tzeltal communities I visited, I witnessed both individual and collective empowerment, and it seemed to me that those go hand in hand. In fact, the whole process of empowerment can be interpreted as to initiate on an individual level before it eventually can unfold on a collective level, and manages to play an important role in changing

social structures in a society (Young 1993; Charlier 2007). As I aim at understanding the concept of empowerment through the worldview of the Tzeltals, which represent a different context, I choose to not study the term through the division of individual and collective empowerment. My emphasis on empowerment shall be on the division demonstrated in the following sections.

Proposed concept of empowerment: Tzeltal women's own narrative

In a general manner, empowerment can be described as the process in which a person who previously did not have the option of choice, manages to change this situation to be able to make his or her own choices (Kabeer 1999; Calvès 2009). One of the aims of this thesis is to propose a way of doing research and producing knowledge in contexts with different world-views, through adapting a concept grounded in western epistemology, which in this case is empowerment. I am in an early stage of learning about Tzeltal epistemology, so what I propose here is tentative. Nevertheless, I hope that by proposing ways of thinking about Tzeltal world-views in relationship to empowerment, it can lead to future work that continues to seek to better meet Tzeltal ways of being. By exploring ways of studying these frameworks in their own terms, it can contribute to better understandings across different cultures and cosmovisions. This could generate the type of knowledge which leads to greater synergies between outside organizations' development projects and programs to these communities, and it could also make the locals play important roles in the design and taking decisions related to the projects.

It quickly became clear to me that western notions of understanding empowerment, such as those proposed by Kabeer (1999), may not be the best adapted to Tzeltal communities. Kabeer (1999), divides the empowerment process into resources, agency and achievements. Most Tzeltal

women counted on only few resources, which did not vary much from woman to woman. It seemed to me that notions related to agency and achievements did not make very much sense in these communities either, as Tzeltal epistemology is quite different than western epistemology, where terms such as agency and achievements holds validity. From my conversations with Tzeltal women, notions related to agency and achievements were not naturally brought up, and when I started to talk about decision-making and abilities to negotiate, they were not easily understood. That is why the concepts I propose are based on topics and terms that the Tzeltal women themselves brought up in conversations, or that I witnessed during my interactions in their communities.

Below I present a modified and tentative view of what could be called Tzeltal-inspired ideas of empowerment. They are based on my interactions with twenty different communities and small towns, and more than forty semi-structured conversations, and a deep engagement with the existing literature on Tzeltal epistemologies. This proposed framework on empowerment was also discussed at length with several Tzeltal people, who helped to shape the framework via their comments and suggestions. I was constantly engaging with collective reflexivity to get an understanding of Tzeltal culture and trying to accept this new cultural domain. I was also reminding myself of my positionality as a researcher from a Western institution, in order to not let this positionality dominate the way the information is presented. My attempt on adopting a western concept into a non-western context have been made through establishing three points that characterize the empowerment processes of the Tzeltal women from my own experience in their communities. In order to understand the process of women's empowerment following Tzeltal women's own epistemology, I suggest to switch resources,

agency and achievements into the following elements: *o'tan*- heart, *bayel bin ya c'antic*- necessity and *lequil cuxlejal* - good life.

O'tan (heart)

The concept of women's empowerment in Tzeltal communities must be understood in relation to their own cosmovision. Looking into the way the Tzeltales express themselves, I was struck by the fact that almost every action is expressed “through their heart.” Tzeltal epistemology consist of the believe that human beings are, in one way, made out of flesh and bones, and in another way, they are made out of a set of souls. The souls are gathered inside their hearts, and this might be one of the reasons why their heart seem to always be present and related to things they do (Pitarch 2000). The Tzeltales are people who express a lot of emotions, and they are constantly seeking to reach an emotional well-being. Their hearts can be seen as a symbol of their emotions. Experiencing how important the heart and emotions are to Tzeltales, my curiosity led me to wanting to explore if there were some sort of relation between their concept of empowerment and their emotional well-being.

It suffice to take a look at how the Tzeltales greet each other, to understand the role of the heart in the way they express themselves. In the Tzeltal language, “hello” does not exist. Instead, the Tzeltales greet each other by saying *bin xchi awo'tan* - “what does your heart say.” This indicates that the first contact a Tzeltal has with another person is through understanding each others heart, or their emotional well-being. When a Tzeltal expresses how he or she feels about something, the answer will most often include how the heart feels. Whether a positive or a negative emotion, they are almost always expressed through their hearts. When Tzeltales tell

each other to rest well, often said before going to sleep, they say *cux awo'tan* which literally means “I hope that your heart rests well.” Furthermore, a Tzeltal considers him or herself in a situation of peace when “the heart is at home.” These expressions give us an image of how the heart plays an essential role in the Tzeltals’ way of expressing themselves.

In a meeting with women in the community San Antonio Bulujib, a woman shares her experience with a community development project initiated by the women's group *Antsetic* in her community by saying “we like the work that was initiated a lot. I was thinking it through with my heart, and that is why I am here.” Here, the woman’s positive experience about being part of the community project is expressed through her heart. Another woman from the community Chuch'te'el comments that “when we [women] are alone in the house, we get sick by thinking a lot, but when we go out to meetings, we get distracted, we forget for a moment about our sadness, problems and thoughts. It is a space that enlarges our heart.” Here, a heart that gets bigger can be understood as a symbol of happiness, in contrary to a small heart which might symbolize sadness. This can suggest that the community activities the woman is involved with generate positive emotions in her heart. As the community projects represent spaces where women get together and work on something, get opportunities to take initiatives and make decisions, it could be seen as a space that allows for empowerment.

A colleague at the CEDIAC explained to me how the Tzeltals are reasoning about something that did not go as hoped. A typical saying would be: “It went wrong because there is a lack of harmony in my heart.” When their hearts are feeling fine, things will work out well and the people count on a normal functionality. A woman coordinator in the region of Ch'ich says the following in a regional meeting for women coordinators: “We are planting seeds in our hearts

and in our community which is growing with our work. It's important to bring back into our community what we are learning.” Here, the coordinator’s account of the process of learning and distributing the knowledge in her community takes the symbol of small seeds planted in her heart. This can suggest that a well functioning heart has the potential to lead to growth and abilities to make choices through their community projects. This implies that, at least for these Tzeltal women, the way they feel in their heart has a lot to say on how they feel emotionally and physically. Feeling grief or sadness in their hearts is reason to not feel well, and not being able to perform their duties.

In a meeting for women coordinators in Zona Ch’ich discussing and sharing their experiences of the different projects in their communities, a coordinator says “Even though we come from different places, our hearts are united and we love each other a lot. We support each other as Tzeltal women.” Their hearts are what unite the different women, and can operate as a symbol of solidarity. Being united can give them strength and courage to initiate different activities in their communities. Many of the women that I got to know, often talked about their work in community development projects describing that they were animated about the activities, and that their hearts felt enlarged. These are expressions of positive emotions that can be related to a favorable well-being in their hearts.

Through conversations with Tzeltal women, they expressed that the actions they have taken related to decision-making required strength and a “good heart”, which I interpret to mean a heart that is in an emotionally good shape. In a conversation with an older lady that was involved with different initiatives and collective projects in her community, she revealed that what had given her strength to start taking initiatives and her own decisions was “being in

harmony with her family and being good at heart.” The latter most likely refers to feeling an emotional well-being, which to the Tzeltales represents being at peace and being able to perform different activities. Following the Tzeltal logic of a person having to be in a good shape emotionally to be able to function, one can understand being animated and enthusiastic about something, to be in a good shape emotionally. This is another example that portrays that the heart, related to the emotional well-being, eventually can enable women's abilities of making choices. Accordingly, I relate the well-being of the Tzeltal women's hearts to the notion of empowerment.

Based on my own experiences in the Tzeltal communities, when it comes to women's empowerment in these communities, it can be understood as a process that starts with the well-being of their hearts. This finding was achieved by letting the Tzeltales themselves participate in the developing of the concepts of their empowerment process, that in this particular case is the role of their hearts. This is part of where the ideas of a reflexive process and collaboratory sensemaking, as promoted by Nichols (2009) in doing research in indigenous contexts, were carried out. Through conversations with my Tzeltal colleagues, they affirmed that the health of their heart played an important role when making decisions. In general, the hearts of the Tzeltales have to be in a good shape emotionally in order for them to function normally. I interpret the heart to work as their drive to perform their daily activities, as well as their emotional well-being can generate opportunities to learn and to grow. In this process, a well functioning heart can somewhat be understood as a resource, and as the first step for Tzeltal women to empower themselves. In Kabeer's (1999) concepts about empowerment, resources are seen as the conditions available to women for making choices. As the well-being of their hearts

can strengthen their abilities to make choices, it can be seen as their resource. Following the importance of the emotional well-being of a Tzeltal person in making choices, and based on my interactions with women in Tzeltal communities, I argue, that as a first step, their abilities to empower themselves depend on the level of harmony and well-being in their heart.

Bayel bin ya c'antic - necessity

The experiences of taking part in decision-making processes varied greatly with the different Tzeltal women that I interacted with. Nevertheless, I was able to observe a pattern among the women who had managed to gain some sort of control over themselves, and were able to make certain strategic life choices. Despite living in a patriarchal society, in which men usually are the ones who hold the power in the households as well as in the community, several women had managed to start taking their own decisions and, moreover, to take part of activities that previously were seen as impossible to women in the Tzeltal society. These activities could be everything from managing money through sales of fruits and vegetables from their backyards, to participate in regional meetings and hold community positions. What seemed to be common to these women was that they were all acting out of necessity.

It seemed to me that the different needs of the women was a common factor that pushed them to take the steps necessary to start making their own decisions. This happened either on a collective or on an individual level. These needs could be everything from economic and social, to cultural needs. During a meeting in Jol Xexal in 2012, a woman expressed that “to live well, one does not need that much money, we are not poor.” Following this, it was discussed among the women that their non-material needs were as important as their economic needs, and that

their non-material needs consist of subsistence, affection, protection, knowledge, rest and participation. These are social needs that can make women in Tzeltal communities take actions to gain some kind of power to decide and be able to get their needs covered.

Another example that portrays the possible role of necessity in the empowering process is from a workshop about self-confidence arranged by the women's group *Antsetic*. After having learned about topics around their self-confidence, the women realized that they had certain social needs that they might not have been aware of previously. In the workshop, the women learned about their potentials and were given knowledge on how to act upon their potentials. "I arrived without consciousness, and I discovered that self-confidence exists. During the process I started to be conscious of myself, and I have learned to love myself and to value myself, to know what I want and to look for it, and realizing that it is me doing what I am doing" confesses a participant in the workshop held in May 2017. After acknowledging that they hold a set of social needs such as self-confidence, development and acceptance, it can be observed that these women start to make strategic actions to obtain certain things that they previously did not have, such as respect and value in their own families and in their communities.

The story of the young woman that left her ex-boyfriend after many years in an abusive relationship is another example of when a necessity might have been what provoked the empowerment process of a woman. In this case, it can be understood as a matter of social necessity that had led the young woman to start making her own decisions and eventually leaving the relationship. Her personal necessities of being free to participate (in a job), decision-making and gain knowledge were determinants for her choice of leaving. She expressed that taking the action of leaving her ex-boyfriend, has enabled her to make her own decisions.

The woman went from a life situation of limited choices, to a new situation in which she is able to make her own choices.

During my visit to the community Crucero San Miguel Canshanil, a woman that started to sell bags of peanuts after the meeting caught my attention. I approached her and greeted her in Tzeltal. To my surprise, she responded in a fluent Spanish, and showed to be more than willing to tell me more about herself. She told me that in meetings in other communities and towns, she would always bring some fruits or nuts from her own yard that she would sell to the other participants. “It allows me to earn my own money” she said. Moreover, she had learned to make bread and was also selling these in her own community, as well as in her visits to other communities. Her entrepreneurial spirit impressed me. As a rural Tzeltal woman without any formal education, she was involved in several activities that involved leadership. Not only was she selling her own goods in the local communities. She was also an active member in community affairs and in the different projects initiated by the CEDIAC in her community. This woman's story represented a case of a woman previously limited of choices, that had managed to empower herself, through being able to make her own decisions. When I asked her how she had managed to arrive at where she was today and how she had learned all her knowledge, she answered *por la necesidad*- out of necessity. Coming from a family with very little economic resources, her economic necessities, as well as her social necessities of being able to develop herself and do meaningful activities, had made her take the step to learn how to grow different crops in her backyard, how to sell her fruits and vegetables, and how to actively participate in her community. “I invent things. I cut lemons against cough. No one tells me what to do, I take the initiatives.” The woman have motivated other women in her community to “go out and do

things” to earn some money. She claims that they should not just stay inside all day with their arms crossed complaining about their families’ economic needs, when they instead can take initiatives to activities that can help them meet their needs.

I came in conversation with Tzeltals that revealed that at times, their families’ economic activities, most often involving the production of corn, beans and coffee, were not enough to feed the family. This creates an economic need and can have resulted in that more and more women acknowledge their possibility in contributing to the household income as well. In these cases, their economic necessity has the ability to encourage them to join income generating activities. These actions involve taking initiatives to start producing and selling goods, which allow women to be active decision-makers. I witnessed a lot of Tzeltal women that were involved in economic activities that gave them more responsibilities and abilities to make decisions in their own lives. A young woman that was quite active and participated a lot during a regional meeting of community saving groups, told me about her sudden economic needs after she got separated from her husband. Now having the full responsibility to raise her child, her economic needs forced her to start working at a little community shop, which allows her to gain an income and cover her basic needs. She is now able to work, as opposed to when she was married, and moreover, she now is responsible of making her own decisions. These represented empowering actions, as the women were given the responsibility of

In one way, the necessity component of women's empowerment can be related to agency. Naila Kabeer claims that agency is “ the ability to define one’s goal and act upon them” (1999, 21). When a woman is experiencing a necessity, I argue that through this necessity, the woman is able to acknowledge a situation that she aspires to reach and eventually will act in order to cover

this necessity. This can be through cultivating food that she is selling in her community in order to cover her economic needs, or it can be to join collective work of the women's group to be able to develop skills and abilities that she would not have had access to otherwise. A woman from the community Juan Sabines Verapaz tells the following about the community development projects implemented in her community: "The work we are doing is important to better the life condition of the families. Some families consume and sell the excedent products, in this way they manage to obtain a little money to buy things that we find necessary in the family and that cannot be cultivated on our land, such as sugar, salt, oil, soap and medicines." The needs of buying products that they cannot produce themselves, is met by the economic gain made through selling the surplus of the cultivated fruits and vegetables.

Lequil Cuxlejal

Women's empowerment in the context of Tzeltal Mayans needs also to be understood with *lequil cuxlejal*, which is their concept of a good life, and which directly translated means good living or good life. Although the concept of the good life might vary to each individual, there are some main points that configures in almost every woman's *lequil cuxlejal*. "Lequil cuxlejal is when there is harmony, good words, the path towards the words of God, knowledge. I think that it is our autonomy in the preparation and the harvest of our food with our children" a woman comments during a workshop on Solidarity Economy and gender. A colleague explained me that his meaning of *lequil cuxlejal* is: " about that we live well, without concerns (like if there's enough food or having a roof over our head). It is also about covering economic, social and cultural needs. It is accompanied by spirituality. To have all this is arriving at *lequil cuxlejal*,

these are all complementary.” Another woman comments that “in reality, the good life does not depend on having more money, the richness lies in our knowledge, in our practices in how we work, the lequil cuxlejal lies within ourselves.” This demonstrates that the concept goes beyond the material well-being, as it is also connected to harmony, learning and growth.

During a ceremony that Tzeltales contributes to the blessing of Mother Earth for their cultives held in the community Crucero San Miguel Canshanil, I got to know a woman coordinator. She had been a coordinator in her community for eleven years, and she was also involved in collective agricultural projects in her community. With a good knowledge of Spanish, she seemed to be more than willing to share her experiences with me. When I asked her what she wants to achieve in her life, she starts talking about lequil cuxlejal. “The most important thing is to have good food for the family. Also, I want to keep on growing, take decisions and get ahead in life” she tells me. To her, lequil cuxlejal is connected to the well-being of her family, as well as her own development and growth.

Another woman that connects lequil cuxlejal to the well-being of her family is an older woman that I had met during several occasions. She is involved in many processes and holds various positions in her community, and she tells me, in Tzeltal, that it has not always been easy. We communicate through a translator. I find her story quite impressive, as she only completed two years of primary school, took literacy courses as a grown-up, and today she holds leader positions locally, as well as on a regional level. I had seen her talking in front of an assembly of perhaps seventy people, where she demonstrated confidence and seemed to be comfortable talking in front of big crowds. She reveals that she faced some problems with her husband who, at one point, did not let her go out on her meetings. According to him, she was involved in too

much. With the time, there were more acceptance towards her jobs and positions, and it helped that her sons always supported her. At home with her 11 children, she strives to attain gender equality, as the women decide as much as the men, and the men in her house equally have to learn how to cook. It seemed to me that this woman had achieved a lot, and had gone through some empowering processes that had led her to where she was today. When I asked her about her dreams for the future she answers “Lequil cuxlejal. The good life with my family, that they are doing well and in good health. That they also learn to cultivate, like their parents. And that there are no diseases.” Her concept of the good life is, as with many women, also tied to her family, health and learning.

Many of the women from the soap cooperative *Yip Antsetic*, mentioned lequil cuxlejal when they were talking about their dreams and their aspirations in life. One tells that “making soaps helps with the lequil cuxlejal. Being with all my family also does.” Another one connects the term with economic gains: “When I’m in Yip Antsetic, I’m already in the good life. When there is payment.” She expresses that she hopes the production of soaps will expand, so that they can gain more money to arrive at lequil cuxlejal.

As lequil cuxlejal represents a goal in life to most Tzeltales, it can be seen as their motivation to start making their own choices. If lequil cuxlejal means harmony with the family and in the community, achieving this can to a woman be a motivation for taking a community leader position to contribute to a better community. Likewise, achieving lequil cuxlejal can be the drive and motivation to join a cooperative, to be able to earn some money and contribute to food for the family. Several women express that being part of a cooperative helps them reach their lequil cuxlejal. One woman comments that “being part of the cooperative has helped me

grow, take decisions and get ahead. The cooperative makes me achieve lequil cuxlejal.” Having a strategic life goal, represented by lequil cuxlejal, might be an important factor to these women to start gaining power to make their own choices. The concept of lequil cuxlejal can thus also be understood as an achievement, as it serve as an objective- Tzeltales are constantly seeking to achieve the good life.

Following Tzeltal logic, and basing on my observations in Tzeltal communities of women’s empowerment, I suggest that women's necessities make them take actions, with the help of the emotional well-being of their heart, to achieve at their lequil cuxlejal. The lequil cuxlejal, as we have explored, can involve different things to different individuals, although the main ideas of the concept remain the same to each Tzeltal.

The role of Solidarity Economy in the empowering process

The second aim of my thesis, after having made a tentative characterization of how empowerment is manifested in Tzeltal communities, is to understand the role of Solidarity Economy initiatives on these processes. Through accompanying different Solidarity Economy initiatives in the Tzeltal communities, I was able to get a notion of their role on the empowerment process of women. The initiatives that followed a Solidarity Economy logic that I was able to get to know, consisted of a women's cooperative producing artisanal soaps, community saving groups, pastry collectives, an embroidery cooperative, and local community shops. Some of the collectives were the Tzeltal women's own initiative, while others were initiated with the Jesuit mission in the different communities.

Solidarity Economy initiatives have gained ground in indigenous communities in Chiapas, as an alternative of organizing an enterprise that takes into account and promotes indigenous culture and beliefs. Solidarity Economy initiatives can play an important role to women in these communities, as they represent a space of participation, decision-making, and personal development. Traditional gender roles has made it difficult for women to participate in economic activities and public affairs in general. Instead of participating in income generating jobs, women traditionally stayed at home taking care of children and performing household chores such as cleaning and cooking. With cooperatives, or other types of Solidarity Economy initiatives, women in these indigenous communities have got together to create things, make decisions concerning the activities they perform, and earning their own income.

I interacted with both cooperatives initiated by the Tzeltal women themselves, and cooperatives that are initiatives led by the different projects of the Jesuit mission. The soap cooperative, the community saving groups and the embroidery cooperative are all initiatives in Tzeltal communities with the assistance of the mission. The mission's support can involve external personnel assistance, training, workshops and financing materials or logistics. For instance, in the case of the community saving groups, one of the mission's projects supported these groups through monthly visits by their employees to help with the accounting. The employees of the projects are Tzeltales, which is important for the understanding and transmitting the Tzeltal knowledge through all their activities.

The organization of Solidarity Economy initiatives mostly follow the logic of cooperatives, in where all the producers are also associates. The cooperative *Yip Antsetic*, that produces artisanal soaps, is connected to the Solidarity Economy enterprise *Xapontic* dedicated

to the commercialization of the soaps, and which is not a cooperative in the strict sense, as it count on employees. *Yip Antsetic* is conformed of thirty seven women from five different communities, where each community is responsible for the production of one soap aroma. The members of the cooperative get together in their communities several times a month to produce soaps, as well as discuss the organizing of the group. Each month, representatives from *Xapontic* come to the communities to collect the soaps, that they later sell from their office or to their clients from other parts of the country. The members of the cooperative receive the payment for their soaps every six month, which depends upon how many soaps that were sold.

Meeting the soap producers during several visits to the five communities, gave me a good insight of their work and how the cooperative can function as an empowering mechanism. Most of the Tzeltal women gave me the impression that they liked being part of the cooperative. They liked producing something, learning new things, organizing and being able to earn their own money. “I like producing soap. Sometimes they order 200 soaps a month. Sometimes we produce them during two days. Sometimes I get tired of the work” says one of the members from the community Chalamchen, that had never worked before she entered the cooperative. She alleges that thanks to *Yip Antsetic*, women in her community that previously did not work, now were able to do so. Another young woman from the same community share her views. “Yes I like it a lot. Because I go to meetings in Chilón. I gather women and I tell them something” the woman says, who also forms part of the board of directors. The involvement in the soap cooperative has allowed her to travel outside her community, to get leadership experiences and to have a voice that matters. She expresses that she likes travelling a lot, because before she entered the cooperative, she was “at home cooking or out in the corn fields.” But when she entered the

cooperative, she learned new things, new words and Spanish as well. These represents actions that allowed her to make decisions and being more independent, something that according to her, has enlarged her heart.

An older woman from the community Santa Cruz tells me in Tzeltal about how the times has changed, as before, there were no such work as the soap cooperative. To her, it represents something beautiful that the women in her community get together and participate in the production of soaps. She says that “the money that we gain is not a lot, but it’s something that helps us with small things for the home.” One of my colleagues who is an employee at *Xapontic* and also an associate in *Yip Antsetic*, reveals with a lot of emotion how the work with the soap cooperative has changed her life. “The truth is, I don’t have an education. I only did primary school. The truth is, I have never worked on a computer, I barely spoke Spanish, but now yes, I have learned the two. Now I’m even doing checks, I have learned to do all these things. In May I went to Mexico City for the first time to sell soaps.” She comments that she likes the job a lot with a big smile on her face. She also aspires to learn more, and she confesses that the Spanish language and numbers still represent difficulties to her. Her dream for the future is that she can continue to learn and to grow, and that she will be able to help her family with her job. This is what *lequil cuxlejal* means to her, and work as her motivation and achievement in her activities with the soap cooperative.

Other cooperatives were initiated by women in their communities, without any support from the Jesuit mission. I observed that many of these were created out of common needs of the women. In the community La Victoria, which is a Tzeltal community that has never received any support from the mission, I met several women that had taken the initiative to start a collective.

A young lady told me about how she out of economic necessity got together with several other women in the community to sell fruits. The members of the collective would get together and collect fruits and vegetables from their backyards, that they would sell to other people in their own or nearby community. The activities related to the collective included meetings in where they organized themselves, harvesting the crop, selling the fruits and vegetables and distributing the income. From the young lady's account, their main reason for joining the work were out of economic needs, but also because it represented activities that would give them opportunities to do something outside their home and take decisions. "It brings us harmony in the community and in our family" she reveals. This can be connected to lequil cuxlejal, as we find the notions about harmony and family related to the Tzeltal concept about good life.

The access to join these types of initiatives varied greatly and depended upon several factors. First of all, it seemed that in order for the women to acknowledge their capabilities of participating in the cooperatives, they needed to have some source of information and knowledge about their rights and opportunities as women. Women that had family members that were part of a cooperative, had been exposed to the idea of the participation of women. The different projects of the mission also played a role in informing and promoting women's participation in Solidarity Economy initiatives. This could be done by workshops, seminars and informative meetings in the different communities held by Tzeltal employees from the CEDIAC. Another factor that had an impact on women's participation in these initiatives were their needs. From my own experience, it seemed to me that women in communities that did not have anything to do with the projects of the Jesuit mission, had gotten together and organized in a collective to cover one or several needs that they shared. It could be that their families had economic difficulties,

and the women therefore get together to produce something or offer a service that allow for them to contribute to the household income. The women from the fruit and vegetable collective from the community La Victoria is one example. Another example is a women's collective that produces bread. These women come from coffee producing families that suffered from a plague that hit the coffee plants and caused that these families' incomes were reduced significantly. The women saw the possibilities of contributing to their household income, and therefore got together and started making and selling bread.

I witnessed the impact of workshops and other meetings that informed the women on basic rights and opportunities to organize that exist in their own community. Because of the traditional gender norms in the Tzeltal society, many women were born and raised believing that their position as women limited them because "it is part of our tradition." A colleague told me that the main problem with this patriarchal society not necessarily were the men with their oppressive mentality, but the women that acknowledged and supported it. "Even the women value themselves less in front of the men. They think that this is the tradition, the way it should be" my colleague reveals. She finishes off by claiming that in reality, both men and women have the same rights, even though some women would not acknowledge it. An important factor of why women joined cooperatives is thus their knowledge of their rights and abilities as women. According to traditional gender roles in Tzeltal society, women were not supposed to work to earn money; instead, they needed to stay at home taking care of the children and prepare food. Getting involved with collective initiatives in their communities, has allowed for the women to go out from their home, create something and participate in decision-making processes. "It's not only political changes, but also changes in the everyday life. Women get married later and get

children less frequent. The collective work of women have made the community, the authorities and also us, value ourselves more”(SI Paz 2015).

Allowing for women to join cooperatives or other initiatives can enable a shifting social process into the local communities towards reaching a high tolerance and acceptance of women. A member of the soap cooperative says the following: “Before, us women, we didn’t go out. I have always worked, in the cornfield, in the coffee field, lifting and doing what was possible and necessary. When I entered the soap process, little by little we started to change. Before we didn’t go out, but now we do, we participate, every second month at meetings with honey and coffee producers, women always participate now.” After joining the cooperative, it could be observed that the women had an increased income, as most of them did not have any income at all before joining the cooperatives.

It can be observed from the different experiences of the Tzeltal women above, that their involvement in the cooperatives can have an important impact on their lives. After joining Solidarity Economy initiatives, many women face new opportunities of participating in economic and decision-making activities, and moreover, it has allowed them to gain new knowledge, know more places and more people. These initiatives represent spaces where women can unite, learn, grow and do their activities all maintaining their culture and way of doing things. In communities where there are women that have taken steps to empower themselves through Solidarity Economy initiatives, there is undoubtedly more openness and acceptance towards women by the men. This has allowed for women to have active leader roles in their community, which represents a shift of the traditional gender norms in Tzeltal communities.

Throughout my encounters with Tzeltal women participating in different Solidarity Economy initiatives, I was able to recognize the established points developed in the section above that characterize their empowerment process. Many of the women joined the initiatives because they faced an economic (or social) need, and their activities with the cooperative could help them cover these. A good emotional well-being could either be a factor for joining the cooperative, or being part of the cooperative could better their emotional well-being as these women demonstrated positive feelings of happiness, accomplishment and satisfaction of being involved with the activities. Many of the women expressed that being in a cooperative helped them arrive at *lequil cuxlejal*, or even that they feel that they already had achieved *lequil cuxlejal* by being involved in the cooperative or other Solidarity Economy initiatives.

Concerning external actors, such as the Jesuit mission or other types of development organizations, it is important for them to take into account the local dynamics before initiating or supporting empowering mechanisms. As I have explored through this thesis, Tzeltal women's way of empowering can be seen as processes initiated by one or several needs, and further, the process is strengthened through the well-being of their heart in order to achieve their *lequil cuxlejal*. These concepts are an attempt to approach empowerment to make sense to Tzeltales by implementing notions that correspond to their own epistemology. In order for development programs initiated by external actors, with a focus on empowering women, to work successfully in indigenous communities, I suggest a similar method of studying and incorporating local world-views into the design of the programs. In the case of initiatives created for Tzeltal communities, addressing the tentative points elaborated above can approach the development initiative to correspond to Tzeltal worldview. A development program with the aim of

empowering women in Tzeltal Mayan communities can, for instance, address root causes for needs and negative emotions linked to unhappiness, and further adapt ways of indicating common life goals to Tzeltales.

Conclusions

Through this thesis I have explored how women's empowerment is manifested in the communities of the Tzeltal Mayan in the northeastern jungle region of Chiapas. Different development initiatives that aim at empowering women have gained many adherents for their abilities in contributing to economic development and contributing to a more gender-equal society. In the literature review I explored various takes on women's empowerment. Although popular among big development institutions, the term empowerment has been criticized by others for being too technical and too narrow to serve as a beneficial mechanism to all individuals in different contexts. In places where the population holds different worldviews than the creators of the development program, it becomes necessary to take into account local beliefs in the design of these programs. Likewise, when a term that is usually applied in the western world is studied outside the west, local epistemologies must be understood and incorporated into the research in order to adapt the term to make sense in that particular context.

Adapting a mainstream concept into an indigenous context is a challenging task. Many researchers are promoting participatory and decolonizing methodologies for studies in indigenous societies. This is to value local knowledge and to empower the local communities where the research takes place. These research methods also questioning the positionality of the researchers, and aim at limiting the asymmetrical power relation between the researcher and the participants. I have therefore incorporated these methods to give importance to the local knowledge, and at the same time being conscious of my positionality as an outsider into indigenous communities. Throughout this research project I have made efforts to minimize

power imbalances that are presented when a researcher arrives into the field. The Tzeltal people were actively participating in the research process, from sharing their beliefs for the data to shaping the concepts in this thesis. By giving the Tzeltal women important roles in the whole research process, the outcomes of this exploratory thesis are hopefully more identifiable and correspond to their reality and world-views.

This thesis has explored different dynamics of empowerment in Tzeltal communities, and we learn that it is a complex process. In my attempt to adapt the term empowerment to make sense to Tzeltales, I strived to get a broad understanding of their beliefs and social structures during my fieldwork, acknowledging that it would be a challenging task. In my tentative effort I developed the following notions that characterize the empowerment processes to Tzeltal women: *awo'tan*- heart, *bayel bin ya c'antic*- necessity and *lequil cuxlejal* - good life. The women's necessities make them take actions, with help of the emotional well-being of their heart, to strive for their *lequil cuxlejal*. Because Tzeltales are people that expresses everything with their emotions, the well-being of their heart is very important. I explored that the first step of the empowerment process starts with the level of emotional well-being in their heart, and with this resource the women are able to start taking actions to empower themselves. I also found that the needs of the women seemed to be the cause that made them take a particular action or decision to cover their needs. To many of the women, their needs were economic, but social needs were also reasons for some women to take initiatives to empower themselves. Lastly, women's empowerment in Tzeltal communities also needs to be understood with *lequil cuxlejal*, their concept of the good life. Every Tzeltal is constantly seeking to reach this point, and although it can have a different meaning to each person, I found that *lequil cuxlejal* most often involve to be

in harmony with the family, that their economic needs are covered, and to have possibilities of development and growth. Lequil cuxlejal is their motivation for almost everything they do. Therefore, empowerment to Tzeltal women can also be understood through actions they do to achieve their version of good life.

Through my interactions with Tzeltal women from different Solidarity Economy initiatives, I was able to get an insight on the role of these on their empowerment process. Most of the women experienced positive changes after having joined cooperatives or other collective initiatives in their communities. They were able to take initiatives, decisions, earning their own money, growing and developing themselves. Moreover, there could be observed a shift in their communities. There was an overall openness towards women's role as leaders, decision-makers and participants in the economy. I was able recognize the established points that characterize Tzeltal women's empowerment process in their involvement with Solidarity Economy initiatives. I propose that external development programs with a focus on women's empowerment created for these communities, should consider to address these points in order to incorporate Tzeltal ideas and ways of thinking. Considering this type of knowledge can contribute to a better understanding between development agencies and the local population, which can have the possibility to generate positive outcomes in these communities.

I hope that this research will be a significant contribution to the field of conducting research in indigenous communities, as well as a contribution to the existing literature on empowerment and development. This thesis sheds lights on topics concerning contexts with different epistemologies, and the importance of adapting concepts and terms corresponding to these contexts. Future research needs to take into account alternative ways of collecting,

establishing and producing knowledge to grasp a comprehensive picture of current realities. By giving more attention to alternative knowledges, it can generate better cooperation in development programs which can have the ability to contribute in better outcomes to local populations.

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