

Responding to the socio-environmental devastation of the Atoyac - Zahuapan Basin: a popular school for lifelong learning

Adriana Martínez Rodríguez¹

“Among all of us, we know everything”.

Huichol proverb

Summary:

In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, communities, community-based organizations and supportive academics in the Mexican state of Tlaxcala met virtually in a Constituent Assembly which resulted in the Popular-Community Training School “Presbíteros Rubén and Juan García Muñoz”. Its objective was determined during the assembly: to strengthen the social subject in the community to guarantee effective, committed and long-term intervention in order to transform the reality of the Atoyac-Zahuapan Basin which has been affected

for more than five decades by the pollution of its rivers, soil, air and food and the progressive deterioration of the health of its population. This article will address the causes that led to the school’s creation, its objectives, the needs to which it will respond and the challenges that lie ahead to face the socio-environmental crisis that afflicts this region and the population that inhabits and travels through it.

[1] Professor, School of Economics, UNAM. Contact: ayhanam@tuta.io.

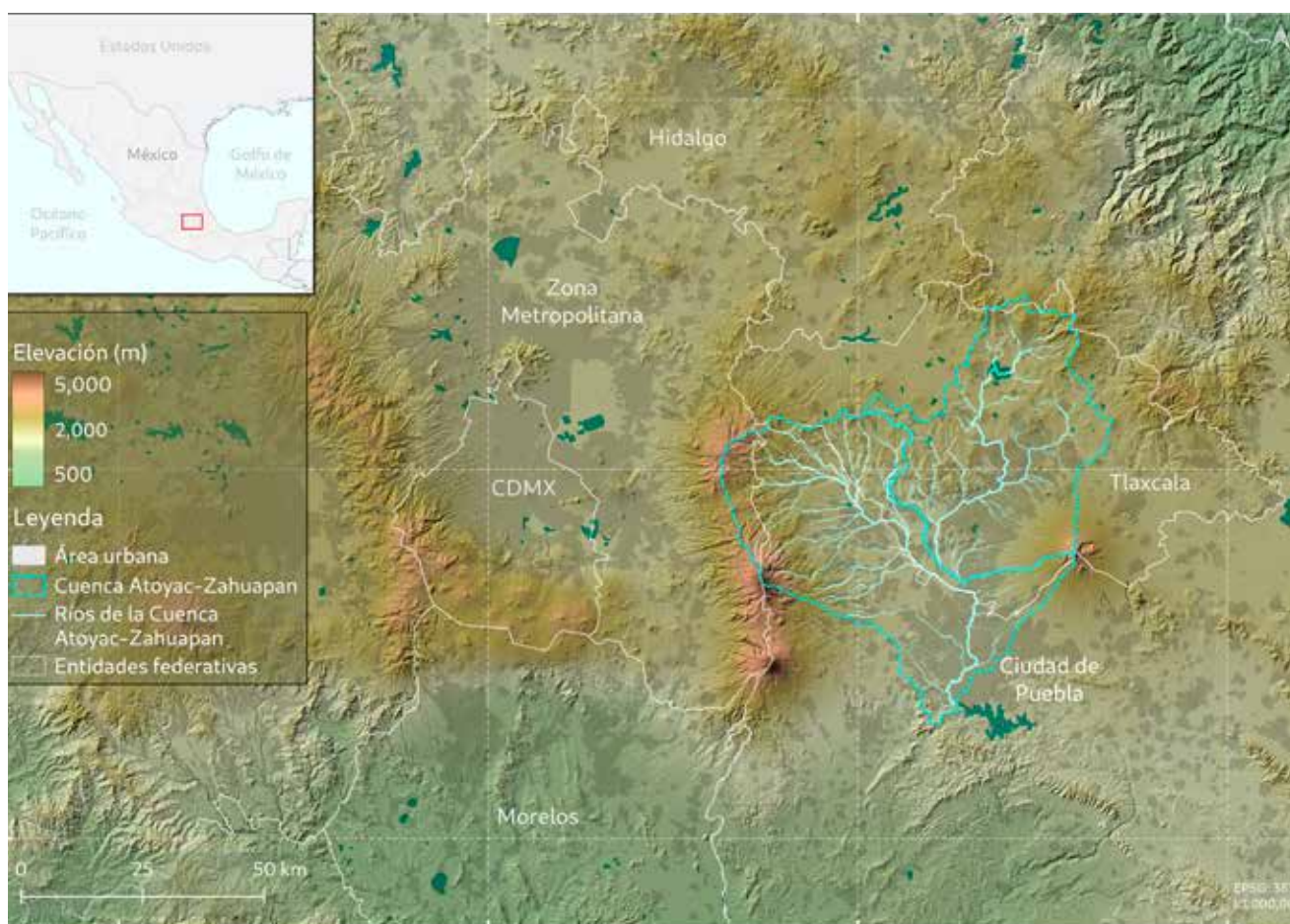
Key words: socio-environmental crisis, school, communities, justice, advocacy

The socio-environmental crisis in the Atoyac-Zahuapan sub-basin

The Upper Atoyac basin, better known as the Atoyac-Zahuapan basin, is located in the states of Puebla and Tlaxcala, in central Mexico. It is home to 3.1 million people, making it the fourth largest metropolitan area in the country, out of which 909,000 live in Tlaxcala, making up 71.4% of the total state population (INEGI, 2020a). In addition, near its rivers the Atoyac (which emerges from the Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl volcanoes) and the Zahuapan (which starts in the north of the state of Tlaxcala), there are more than twenty

thousand manufacturing companies of different industries, of which 44.4% (9,068) operate in Tlaxcala (INEGI, 2020b) (see Map 1).

The industrial development of the watershed, which began in the 1960s with the construction of the Mexico-Puebla highway and the arrival of the Volkswagen assembly plant, was made possible by factors such as the abundant availability of water and a labor force displaced from their farmlands, the change from agricultural to urban and industrial land use and the environmental deregulation prevailing in Mexico, especially since the imposition of the neoliberal model. Consequently, trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation also proliferated in the basin, a process of community dissolution was set off and industrial pollution spread



SOURCE: PREPARED BY SAMUEL ROSADO, BASED ON DATA FROM INEGI (2020).

due to the discharge of untreated (or insufficiently treated) wastewater into the rivers, causing one of the worst health crises in Mexico (CNDH, 2017). Today it is considered a Region of Sanitary and Environmental Emergency (RESA).

For more than 20 years the men, and especially the women, from the communities of Tlaxcala, organized as the *Coordinadora por un Atoyac con Vida (CAV)*, have demanded official recognition of the socio-environmental devastation and a forceful response that would lead to the comprehensive restoration of the watershed. They have been accompanied in this work by the Human Rights and Local Development Center Fray Julián Garcés (CFJG) and supported by scientists and academics from different universities. Faced with the negligence and complicity of the governments in office, they have also denounced the lack of sincerity and of political will to address the problem. They have warned about the consequences of this environmental crisis and the violation of the human right to a dignified life of the women and girls who are victims or potential victims of the trafficking networks.

After resorting to international ethical tribunals, they filed a complaint before the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and developed a Community Proposal for the Integral restoration of the Atoyac-Zahuapan Basin and the reparation of damages to the communities, among other actions. In 2021, they decided that part of the struggle should include self-education. It was necessary to respond to their reality and strengthen themselves as social subjects to build the common good.

Popular-Community School “Presbíteros Rubén y Juan García Muñoz”: objectives and challenges

A complex problem such as the socio-environmental devastation of an entire watershed requires equally complex proposals. Complexity implies patience, collective work at different levels and, above all, honesty in admitting that sometimes it is necessary to respond

differently. Conventional education plans are destined to fail as a possible instrument to confront the global ecological crisis when school programs and their contents are designed without social participation, when they are homogeneous without considering the diverse local realities and when plans are imposed top down and not shared horizontally. The aim ought to be to train subjects to solve problems. Nevertheless, education itself is a tool for rethinking, reformulating and reworking ways of making life possible, the enjoyment of rights and the full development of people’s capacities possible.

For many years, communities and their knowledge, practices, experiences and forms of organization have been excluded from educational spaces and decision-making processes. Meanwhile, the problems that afflict the Atoyac-Zahuapan watershed demand that all those involved acquire not only new knowledge, but also new methods to articulate ways to defend it. For this reason, in March and April 2021 a constitutive assembly was held.

[...] community groups, allied civil organizations and academia, with the aim of discussing the founding of a popular training school, to have a self-managed and permanent space, where we could learn what we need based on what we have done for many years: fighting for the dignity of women and the care of our common home (CFJG, 2022: 113)².

This permanent popular training school could not be created in any other way than through a collective decision and therefore, in assembly, it was determined that its fundamental objective is to strengthen the community social actor “as a subject of action to guarantee effective, committed and long-term intervention in the transformation of the reality of the watershed, where women can live free of violence and no one gets sick or dies from pollution” (CFJG, 2022:113).[2] The need

2. In those same assemblies, the name was chosen by consensus: Popular-Community Training School “Presbíteros Rubén and Juan García Muñoz” in honor of two pillars of the community who always encouraged the struggle for justice and the care of the Common Home. Both passed away in 2020.

for a dialogue space amongst researchers, communities (and even authorities who have a legitimate desire to contribute to the solution of these problems) was made visible. To achieve the objective, it is essential to share knowledge of training and scientific, technical and political production. Only in this way will it be possible for community members to participate in research and decision-making processes, while local, traditional, technical and cultural knowledge is recovered, valued, used and disseminated.

The integral restoration of the Atoyac-Zahuapan watershed requires not only strong and effective action by the state to repair the socio-environmental damage, but also the participation of communities through educational and pedagogical proposals that accompany the process. Although the Popular Community School is a project outside the educational system, the truth is that to ensure the effective, collective and trust-based participation of all the different local, regional and/or national political actors, it is essential that self-management be included as part of the curricula of any official project. Developing a critical awareness of reality that allows participants to identify and always seek justice and the common good is one of the guiding principles of this Community School, but it should also be one of the guiding principles of any educational program. In this way, the collective interests of communities can be asserted in decision-making spaces, in the development of proposals for solutions and in intra-community debates in which men and women participate equitably.

Two years after the constitutive assembly, the Popular Community School was able to incorporate dozens of people from the communities and several academics from the most important universities in Mexico, such as UNAM, Chapingo, Iberoamericana, Autónoma de Tlaxcala, among others. Initially, they organized a preliminary stage with the purpose of promoting the integration of participants. It was also meant to establish short, medium and long-term objectives and develop an analysis that would allow them to define strategies and elaborate the contents of the next phase: the per-

manent collective training. The hope, in addition to being its guiding principle, is that the school will provide its members with the tools to participate actively and effectively in the restoration of their watershed so that they can consolidate themselves as social subjects with a voice and a vote. This does not guarantee that it will be enough, however. Just as the context demanded an educational space, national problems require that similar proposals be integrated into public education systems with the participation of students, parents, teachers and communities.

Conclusions: building the school that is needed

The Popular-Community Training School “Presbiteros Rubén and Juan García Muñoz” was created out of the need to strengthen the struggle of the Tlaxcala communities seeking the integral restoration of the Atoyac-Zahuapan basin and to prevent the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. For twenty years they have publicly denounced the socio-environmental crisis that has made them sick, has taken the lives of friends and family members and has repeatedly violated their collective and individual right to live a life full of possibilities. Faced with silence from institutions that ignore while pretending to listen, the communities took over the responsibility of preparing themselves to be agents of change: the school has become as a space for self-training, coexistence and collective instruction to respond to a reality that threatens to undermine the essential conditions of human life. But this alternative cannot be reproduced with a vertical structure in which its members have no voice and no vote. To change the reality that threatens, this school must start from the collective principle that guides, as the Wixárika (Huichol) people say: only among all of us do we know everything.

References:

National Human Rights Commission (2017). Recommendation 10/2017 on the violation of the human rights



PHOTO: "RÍO ATOYAC" BNAMERICAS

to a healthy environment, clean water and access to information, in relation to the contamination of the Atoyac and Xochiac rivers and their tributaries; to the detriment of those who inhabit and transit in the municipalities of San Martín Texmelucan and Huejotzingo, in the state of Puebla; and in the municipalities of Tepetitla de Lardizábal, Nativitas and Ixtacuixtla de Mariano de Matamoros, in the state of Tlaxcala. Mexico City: National Human Rights Commission. Available at: https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Recomendaciones/2017/Rec_2017_010.pdf.

Centro Fray Julián Garcés Derechos Humanos y Desarrollo Local, A. C. (2022). Fire of collective hope. 20 years building the common good. Tlaxcala: Centro Fray Julián Garcés. Available at: <https://www.centrofray-juliangarcés.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-Informe-CFJG-XX-ANOS-Final.pdf>.

National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) (2020a). Results of the 2020 Population and Housing Census. Available at: <https://censo2020.mx/>.

-- (2020b). National Statistical Directory of Economic Units 2020. Available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/mapa/denue/>.