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Rural democratisation in Mexico's deep south: grassroots right-to-know campaigns in Guerrero

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Rural democratisation in Mexico's deep south: grassroots right-to-know campaigns in Guerrero

Jonathan Fox, Carlos García Jiménez and Libby Haight

In Mexico's southern state of Guerrero, rural social and civic movements are increasingly claiming their right to information as a tool to hold the state publicly accountable, as part of their ongoing issue-specific social, economic, and civic struggles. This study reviews the historical, social and political landscape that grounds campaigns for rural democratisation in Guerrero, including Mexico's recent information access reforms and then compares two different regional social movements that have claimed the 'right to know'. For some movements, the demand for information rights is part of a sustained strategy, for others it is a tactic, but the claim bridges both more resistance-oriented and more negotiation-oriented social and civic movements.

Keywords: rural democratisation; transparency; accountability; Oportunidades; Guerrero; Mexico

Mexico experienced the first agrarian revolution of the twentieth century, followed by a regime that combined authoritarian rule with distributive reform. Though a decades-long political transition has since transformed a one-party regime into a multi-party competitive system, the rural democratisation process remains incomplete and contested. To shed light on whether and how rural state-society relations have changed in the process, this study analyses recent grassroots movements in Guerrero, a largely rural state in Mexico's 'deep south' that shares levels of poverty and repression that are comparable to Oaxaca and Chiapas.¹

Mexican society is now majority urban, but at least one quarter of the national population still lives in small villages and hamlets. In Guerrero, more than 40 percent of the state's just over three million people meet the government's narrow

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¹For links to national, state and local human rights groups' reports, see the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations at <http://www.redtdt.org.mx>. Comprehensive, comparable data on long-term trends is not available, however.

definition of 'rural', living in communities of less than 2,500 people. Approximately 30 percent of the rural population is considered indigenous.² Sharp inequalities divide the state's urban tourist port of Acapulco from the rural hinterlands, which are cross cut by the Highway of the Sun, an expensive toll road designed to bring tourists quickly from Mexico City to the coastal hotels. The state is also divided into at least seven geographically, socially and economically distinct regions. In some, smallholders have access to well-watered land and natural resources, and mangos rot where they drop, as in the case of Costa Grande, to the west of Acapulco. In contrast, in the indigenous regions of the Montaña, Alto Balsas and Costa Chica, few can eke a living out of the dry hillsides and most must migrate in search of low-wage jobs. The state's regions also differ in terms of their ethnic identities, languages, and gender relations, as well as the varying ideologies and capacities of their social organisations. In spite of this diversity, however, rural social and civic movements throughout the state campaign for government accountability, to defend human rights, and to promote economic development strategies that would make family farming viable.

Over the past century, the state's repeated cycles of social mobilisation and political polarisation earned the nickname 'Angry Guerrero' (Bartra 1996). In the immediate aftermath of the Mexican revolution, in the early 1920s, alliances between workers and agricultural cooperatives attempted to democratise coastal towns and villages under the banner of the Acapulco Workers' Party (Vizcaino and Taibo 1983). Merchant elites demanded repression of independent organising. When agrarian reformers gained national political power in the mid-1930s, some land was redistributed. Guerrero subsequently became a bastion of one-party rule under the authoritarian corporatist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Nevertheless, civic and social movements repeatedly pressed for social reform and public accountability. In the 1960s, the government's hard-line response led two movements to take up arms in the mountains – the Guerrilla Army of the Poor and the Guerrero Civic Alliance. By the mid-1970s, military repression, eventually accompanied by government rural development investments, managed to demobilise both groups.³

Guerrero's repeated waves of protest focused more on changing how the state rules than on mounting electoral challenges to the regime, but this changed with the 1988 presidential elections, when a popular centre-left challenger swept both urban and rural areas of the state. Though the election was marred by fraud, broad-based grassroots movements followed up by contesting municipal elections throughout the state, leading to a bloody backlash in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Melgar 1990, Gutiérrez 1998). Mexico's longstanding ruling party eventually lost the presidency to a center-right challenger in 2000, but the PRI retained much of its power over Mexico's rural citizens through its hold on state governments. It is therefore remarkable that in 2005, a centrist was elected governor of Guerrero with the backing of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which also swept the municipal elections in rural areas.

²Guerrero's four main indigenous peoples are Nahuatl, Mixteco, Amuzgo, and Tlapaneco (also known as the Me'phaa). In addition, Afro-Mexican communities live along the coast. For official demographic data on ethnicity, see <http://www.cdi.gob.mx>.

³On Guerrero's rural guerrilla movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Mayo (1984), Bartra (1996), and Doyle (2003), among others.

In this context of both national and state level transitions from one-party rule to multi-party competition, in a state known for its combative rural civil society, Guerrero's experience offers a useful test case for rural democratisation (Fox 1990). Has political regime change led to changes in state-society relations?⁴ This study begins to address this question by analysing rural movement efforts to exercise newly-won citizen rights. The specific focus is on rural civil society initiatives using the 'right to know' as a tool to bolster longstanding campaigns to build self-managed community-based economic development institutions, to bolster peasant influence over the policy process, to defend human rights, and to put indigenous rights into practice.

In Guerrero, the concept of rural civil society refers, in practice, primarily to mass membership organisations that are autonomous from the state.⁵ Many share an intense scepticism of political parties. Their strong commitment to defending their autonomy dates back several decades, to before the emergence of explicit indigenous rights approaches to autonomy (Fox and Gordillo 1989, Fox and Hernández 1992). These rural movements have consistently campaigned for both social and political rights – in other words, as peasants, as indigenous peoples, and as citizens. Their struggle for the right to access the state's social and economic resources without having to cede their right to freedom of association drives the difficult transition from clientelism to citizenship (Fox 1994).

The ideological, organisational, and legal legacy of Mexico's agrarian revolution frames these rights claims. In Mexico's homegrown grassroots radical tradition, the most famous Zapatista slogan 'land and freedom' embodies the inseparability of social and political rights. For the original Zapatistas, moreover, the concept of 'freedom' referred more to their demand for self-governance for agrarian communities, including peasant control over land, water, and justice, than to partisan electoral competition. Indeed, the original Zapatista land reform programme ended with the call for 'Freedom, Justice, and Law', indicating that the rule of law was a grassroots demand.

⁴Note that many of Mexico's states have followed their own distinctive pathways to political change. In some states, alternation in power through multi-party electoral competition in governor's races preceded the change in the party in power at the national level in 2000, while other states still have yet to cross a minimalist democratic threshold, as in the case of Oaxaca. The first Mexican states to make this breakthrough were in the north, which fit the widely-held assumption that the social foundations of political democracy depend on urbanisation and the rise of the middle class. Guerrero's historical trajectory suggests, in contrast, that the impulse for political democracy can be grounded in peasant and indigenous movements, and the difference in outcomes depends heavily on whether the state responds with repression or political opening. In Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the regime recognised state level electoral victories that came from the right, while denying those that came from the left. This pattern was known as 'selective democratisation'. On the role of 'subnational politics' in Mexican democratisation, see Cornelius *et al.* (1999).

⁵In contrast to the neighbouring states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, Guerrero has very few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with any rural presence, and the Catholic church has not been a leading force for democratisation and social change – with the notable exception of support from the Tlapa diocese for the 'Tlachinollan' Human Rights Center (www.tlachinollan.org). For an overview of NGO-grassroots movement relations in Mexico before electoral democratisation, see Fox and Hernández (1992). Yaworsky's (2002) study addresses the contradictions involved in NGO development activities in Guerrero, though most of the organisations he considers under that label are membership organisations.

In this context, Guerrero's rural, social, and civic movements are increasingly claiming their right to information as a tool, as part of their long-term, issue-specific social, economic, and civic struggles. The campaigns that claim information rights in the context of their efforts to hold the state accountable are cases of 'rightful resistance', in that they draw on rights discourses that are part of the state's own logic of legitimation (O'Brien 1996). Indeed, protest in rural Mexico has long been justified in terms of rights that are at least nominally recognised by the regime. As we will see, information rights – the right to know what the state does in the name of and for the people – fall into this category as well, especially following the presidential election of 2000, which led to a new federal law that promised to put the public's information rights into practice.

To put information rights in broader context, by the late twentieth century, citizens' right to information about how they are governed had become widely recognised around the world, joining the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly as fundamental rights – as recognised in Article 19 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More than 80 countries now have public information rights laws – though their many weaknesses suggest that there is a large gap between public discourse and institutional practices (Fox 2007b). Yet like the guarantee of equal rights under law, information rights are essential tools for the effective exercise of other democratic rights.

Mexico's 2002 law was by far the strongest in the developing world until the Indian government followed up with a remarkably broad initiative in 2005. In both countries, the national reform followed an electoral shift towards greater pluralism, and then emerged from mutually-reinforcing synergy between civil society activists and democratic-minded senior public servants. India's law, however, covers all levels of government and even includes modest individual fines for recalcitrant bureaucrats, to encourage them to respond promptly to public requests. In contrast to India, however, Mexico has a central federal agency charged with ensuring compliance and ruling on citizen appeals to government denials of information requests.⁶ In contrast to Mexico, the Indian law emerged from a center-left government, following years of mass mobilisation and state level reform experiments. Sustained grassroots campaigns effectively linked the demand for the right to know to basic livelihood issues, such as the use of public funds in drought relief projects, or access to food ration cards, such as the Rajasthan campaign known as 'Right to Know, Right to Live', led by the MKSS (Union for the Empowerment of Peasants and Labourers).⁷ Mexico's reform originated in a more top-down process and came from a center-right government, driven by media, academic, and legal elites. The Guerrero experience discussed below is the closest in Mexico to India's grassroots process.

This study begins with a discussion of the social and political landscape that grounds collective campaigns in rural Guerrero, followed by a brief description of Mexico's national and state level information rights reforms. The action-research component⁸ of the study offers a more detailed analysis of two different regional

⁶For more on the Federal Institute for Public Information Access (IFAI), see www.ifai.gob.mx.

⁷On the years of grassroots mass organisation that preceded the national law, see Jenkins and Goetz (1999), Singh (2007), and Kidambi (2008) among others. On the Indian right-to-know experience more generally, see the work of the leading national campaign at www.righttoinformation.info and Baviskar (2007).

⁸For a discussion of action-research dilemmas, see Fox (2006).

social movements that have used the 'right to know' as a tool in their collective campaigns, one mobilised in defence of land rights against threat of displacement, the other for gendered health rights as part of a broader alternative rural development/democratic governance campaign. For some movements, the demand for the 'right to know' is part of a sustained *strategy*, for others it is more of a *tactic*, but the approach is increasingly deployed by a very diverse array of social actors. As in the case of the refrain of broken promises more generally, the Guerrero experience shows that demand for the 'right to know' can bridge both more resistance-oriented and more negotiation-oriented social and civic movements.

Collective campaigns in rural Guerrero

In the Mexican countryside, peasant organisation access to public resources has historically been conditioned on subordination to the state (Fox and Gordillo 1989). The state has responded to repeated waves of peasant protest with a combination of partial material concessions, usually as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy that does not question the rules of the game. Abusers of authority are almost never called to account. Occasionally, government programmes convene participatory councils, but very few manage to share power with the state or control actual resource allocation. This pattern of interaction between the Mexican state and rural civil society began in the 1970s, well before the transition to a multiparty regime, and has changed little since then (Fox 2007a).

The social base of Guerrero's rural, social and civic movements includes land-poor indigenous and peasant corn farmers who also engage in wage labour and artisanal production, as well as better-off, surplus-producing peasants.⁹ In more remote highland regions, smallholders also produce illegal crops. Many peasants are organised at two levels, both locally, through their villages and agrarian reform communities (known as '*ejidos*'), and regionally in 'second-level' organisations. Across these different scales of organisation, some prioritise their economic demands as producers, such as access to credit, inputs and higher prices for their products. Many create their own self-managed community-based economic enterprises as part of what in Mexico is called the 'appropriation of the productive process' (Bartra 1991). Other grassroots movements, in contrast, organise primarily around civic

⁹Only one third of rural households in the state of Guerrero are landholders (Espinosa and Meza Castillo 2000, 79). Yet Guerrero did experience a significant degree of land reform, especially in the 1940s (Salazar Adame 1987). Three-quarters of the state's land is in the agrarian reform sector, where *ejidatarios* have access to an average of 7.8 hectares per family of arable rainfed land (Espinosa and Meza Castillo 2000, 80). Yet these averages hide a high degree of polarization among landholders, since approximately two thirds of both *ejidatarios* and private owners are considered 'sub-subsistence producers', and another 15 percent are considered subsistence producers. At the same time, as in much of rural Mexico, agrarian polarisation is partly mediated by a layer of 'transitional' small-scale producers that produce commercial crops (e.g., coffee). In Guerrero they account for just over 10 percent of producers. This typology, developed by the UN Economic Commission on Latin America, defines sub-subsistence producers as families with less than four hectares of a nationally standardised unit of arable rainfed land, subsistence producers have four to eight hectares, stationary producers have eight to twelve hectares, and surplus-producers have access to more than twelve hectares. Transitional producers are defined as those who employ between 25 and 500 days of wage labour per year. Commercial producers employ more than 500 days of wage labour per year. Though dated, this study of land tenure remains Mexico's most conceptually and methodologically rigorous (CEPAL 1982, 109–10, 278–9).

demands, including human rights, community security, corruption, municipal democratisation, and indigenous self-governance.

One of Mexico's most notable rural democratisation initiatives brings all of these demands together in a region-wide community policing process. Guerrero's most consolidated community police force draws on more than 700 volunteers across six municipalities in Guerrero's indigenous Montaña and Costa Chica regions, an area that includes approximately 100,000 people. This initiative emerged with support from grassroots indigenous leaders, coffee co-ops, and church activists, in response to the systematic abuses of power by the security forces, including collaboration with private criminals. The community police are not 'extra-institutional', insofar as they are led by locally elected, non-partisan leaders of dozens of villages, through a regional coordinating body that bypasses unrepresentative municipal authorities. This *de facto* indigenous autonomy experience of armed dual civic power has survived for 13 years, in spite of governmental hostility.¹⁰

Many of the social and civic organisations active in rural Guerrero today trace their roots back to the first political opening that followed the repression of the early 1970s. Indeed, in its later phases, the government's counterinsurgency strategy also involved substantial infrastructure investments (such as road-building), as well as state intervention in the peasant economy, through state enterprises that provided soft loans, competed with private crop buyers, and built agro-industrial processing installations for peasant crops (Bartra 1996). By 1982, during a brief pro-peasant turn in national policy, the president installed a more moderate, populist-style governor, Alejandro Cervantes Delgado, who began to permit peasant organising – at least around economic development issues.¹¹ Surviving grassroots activists responded to this modest political opening. Peasants also began organising as producers in different regions of the state, most often through 'second-level' organisations known as Unions of *Ejid*os.¹² Throughout the state, low-income consumers in hundreds of villages came together to form broad-based Community Food Councils to defend their right to participate in the oversight of a large-scale government village food store programme; many followed up by then organising as producers (Fox 1992). In 1984, regional-level *ejido* unions launched a state-level coalition to bring more pressure to bear on the government. In response to their

¹⁰For details, see <http://www.policiacomunitaria.org>, García Jiménez (2000a), Johnson (2005, 2007), Reyes Salinas and Castro Guzmán (2008), and Rowland (2005), among others. For discussion in the context of campaigns for rural municipal democratisation, see Fox (2007a, 2007c).

¹¹For most of the twentieth century, Mexican governors were chosen from above, by the president, and then nominally elected.

¹²*Ejid*os are communal land holdings, established by the post-revolutionary state and ostensibly governed by membership assemblies. *Ejido* unions are formal associations of members of different *ejidos* who join forces to work collectively on economic development projects. Because *ejido* unions hold legal status, they can apply for credit and government support for projects. While many of the *ejido* unions formed during this period were induced from above, a substantial number did represent their members (Fox 1992, 2007a). The most dynamic *Uniones de Ejidos* in the early 1980s, which eventually organised a state-level network, were the Alfredo V. Bonfil (coffee, in the Costa Grande and Montaña), Communities of the Costa Chica (hibiscus), *Ejid*os of the Costa Chica (corn and honey), Vicente Guerrero (sesame and corn), Adrián Castrejón (corn), Encarnación Díaz (peanuts and corn), Emiliano Zapata (corn), and the Hermenegildo Galeana (community forestry). See Bartra (1996), Espinosa (1998), García Jiménez (2000a, 2000b) and Meza Castillo (2000), among others.

campaign, the state government created two programmes: 'Credit on your word' (Crédito a la palabra) and 'Giving and giving' (Dando y dando).

On 10 April 1987, the anniversary of Zapata's assassination, the state-level network of *ejido* unions helped launch a broader state-wide organisation of 27 autonomous regional producer groups, to further pressure and negotiate with the new state government. Just 10 days before incoming governor José Francisco Ruíz Massieu took office, the Alliance of Autonomous Peasant Organizations of Guerrero, or Alcatro, was born. However, the new governor chose to use his clout to revive the presence of Mexico's main corporatist peasant organisation, the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), which is a branch of the then ruling party (PRI). At the time of the opening for autonomous producer organisations in the early 1980s, the CNC had largely withered away in Guerrero. However, the new governor's strategy was to intervene in *ejido* union elections with threats and bribery to bring them under the control of the CNC. Those that did not submit lost access to economic support for their proposals for productive projects.

As in many other parts of the country, the national government's lack of support for family farming generated social discontent, which was expressed through electoral opposition as well as organised protest. When elections were marred by fraud, as in the case of the hotly contested 1988 presidential race, violent repression followed. The following year, municipal election conflicts in Guerrero culminated in the violent removal of several mayors, as well as 20 political killings (Melgar 1990, Gutiérrez 1998).

In spite of this hostile environment, Alcatro still campaigned for support from federal and international agencies. Local organisations were able to gain access to revolving funds for marketing their products, for improvements to storage and transportation infrastructure, and for technical assistance and training. This convergence also took on the challenge of launching the Agricultural Marketing Organization of Guerrero, or Cagsa. Many peasant organisations were convinced that they could retain more of the value of their production by gaining more control over the marketing process. But a combination of inexperience and powerful market failures posed difficult obstacles. Coffee, honey, hibiscus, and artisan products initially found some market success, but Cagsa did not survive. Facing this impasse, several of the organisations involved in Cagsa created another marketing network, this time just for corn, called the Network of Corn Marketing Organizations. Through workshops and forums, this group exchanged ideas and experiences, while also successfully negotiating government subsidies for corn marketing, such as loans for packaging, equipment for quality analysis, and training.

In 1992, when the government privatised the distribution of agricultural inputs, a group of organised producers formed the social enterprise called the Agricultural Marketing Services Broker, or Cocosa. This social enterprise distributed fertiliser to its member organisations for two years, but went out of business when the new governor Rubén Figueroa Alcocer – another hard-liner – launched a state-wide clientelistic programme to distribute cheap fertiliser (which proved to be electorally effective).¹³ At the national level, the federal government also began to change the

¹³This move was part of a broader trend in which the Mexican state reconfigured the nature of its intervention in rural society, rather than withdrawing, as is widely claimed. Seen from afar, it looked like the Mexican state had fully withdrawn from markets, but seen from below, state governments often occupied the space left by those that withdrew, while new national agrarian, welfare and marketing agencies intervened even more deeply than their predecessors (Fox 1995, Snyder 2001).

constitution's land reform provisions, to promote the individual titling and possible sale of *ejido* lands (Assies 2008).

This period also turned out to be a major turning point for indigenous organisation in the state. In 1992, regional indigenous organisations formed a statewide network known as the Guerrero Council of 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance. This network campaigned for indigenous autonomy, a political strategy that rejected both separatism and assimilation (Overmyer-Velázquez 2003, 2007). The Council's core group was led by indigenous community-based organisations, including smallholder groups, rural consumer councils, and a coalition of communities that resisted a proposed hydroelectric dam in the Alto Balsas region (Hindley 1999, Díaz de Jesús and de Jesús Alejandro 2000).

Government strategies successfully undermined social organisations that were trying to construct their own development alternatives, leading grassroots movements – especially those based among the landless and sub-subsistence producers – to take a more confrontational approach, especially after the 1994 Zapatista rebellion. This growing polarisation peaked with the *Aguas Blancas* massacre of 28 June 1995. State police stopped a truck carrying peasants on their way to market, as well as leaders of the Peasant Organization of the Southern Sierra (OCSS) on their way to a planning meeting in Atoyác de Álvarez. The police ordered them out of the truck and shot seventeen of them in the head. Many reports indicate that the assassinations were carefully planned by the governor, as hospitals and local police forces were warned the day before that something was about to happen on 28 June. Phone calls recorded the governor's voice stating that he planned to do everything possible to prevent the leaders of the OCSS from arriving at their destination. Following the massacre, he reportedly said, 'They wanted a war, and a war is what they got. We are the authorities, aren't we?' (PRODH 1995). Photographs of the massacre prove that the truck's passengers were *not* armed, though the following morning the state police returned to the site to place guns in the hands of the bodies of the fallen, in a desperate attempt to legitimise their actions as 'self-defence'.¹⁴

This event radicalised social movements and organisations in Guerrero, encouraging sympathy with underground armed resistance. At the same time, more moderate rural civil society organisations came together yet again, in the Permanent Forum for Alternative Rural Development in Guerrero. Led by regional economic organisations as a space for coordination and dialogue, the Permanent Forum organised 10 additional sector-specific forums, a Peasant Congress, a mobilisation to commemorate the death of revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, and developed a Program for Alternative Rural Development. These efforts made organised rural civil society more visible, in spite of the state government's refusal to respond to their demands.

Meanwhile, after the *Aguas Blancas* massacre, the OCSS stepped up its mobilisation in response to the governor's attempts to manipulate the facts, demanding that he be removed from office. In 1996 these efforts were joined by at least 20 additional regional organisations, which created the Union of Organizations from the Southern Sierra, which gained national recognition. After the governor had presented a doctored video that falsely showed the massacre victims as having been armed, the full original video was leaked. A national TV news programme shocked the country by broadcasting unprecedented images of the assassinations. This

¹⁴This paragraph draws on a detailed human rights report (PRODH 1995).

scandal obliged the governor to pay the modest price of taking an 'indefinite leave of absence'. Part of his legacy, however, was the emergence of a new guerrilla movement called the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), which went public on the first anniversary of the *Aguas Blancas* massacre, in 1996.

The interim governor who finished the term, Angel Aguirre Rivero (1996–98), continued the strategy of bolstering official corporatist peasant organisations and making closed-door side deals with other organisations.¹⁵ The government blocked the Permanent Forum's effort to negotiate as a group. By the end of 1996, the government launched its own alternative by creating top-down Regional Development Councils, which were supposed to be state-society forums for negotiation.¹⁶ In 1999, the federal army tortured and jailed landless anti-logging activists from the Organization of Peasant Ecologists of the Sierra de Petatlán y Coyoaca de Catalán. Amnesty International recognised them as 'prisoners of conscience' and even the Environment Minister visited them in jail, but they were not released until after one of their lawyers, Digna Ochoa, was found dead in her Mexico City office.

These setbacks left rural social movements and peasant organisations dispersed, fighting localised battles on their own. Most focused on regional or sectoral organising efforts and some of the more dynamic organisations were coopted by the new government model of Regional Councils, which were launched in the Montaña and Sierra regions of Guerrero. Other Regional Councils began to form but did not come together (such as in Tierra Caliente, Costa Grande and Costa Chica). In the Costa Grande region, a more self-driven process of organisation led to the creation of the Sustainable Development Promotion Council (Coprodescog), which operated between 2000 and 2002. These new government-sponsored organisations did little to help producer organisations to survive the neoliberal winds of free market policies.

Though most official councils involved little actual power-sharing, there were exceptions, a few sustained 'rightful resistance'. Some of the regional councils that co-managed the federal government's massive rural food store programme became autonomous counterweights in spite of the inhospitable environment – as in the case of the Chilapa region (Meza Castillo 2000). Low profile, these elected, non-partisan councils focused primarily on the limited goal of oversight, to assure that the programme delivered subsidised staple foods to the state's more than 1,200 village stores. They primarily served net corn consumers – landless and sub-subsistence peasants – especially in indigenous regions. Of Guerrero's 15 councils, seven openly challenged bureaucratic power, but federal officials were consistently able to use subtle divide-and-conquer tactics to prevent the more autonomous councils from winning the leadership of the state-wide Union of Community Food Councils.¹⁷

¹⁵Closed-door negotiations facilitate government attempts to buy off social leaders by offering short-term material concessions or 'support', so that they set aside their larger strategic demands and stop working with other organisations. This practice is popularly referred to as '*maiceo*' (which refers to the practice of scattering corn on the ground to feed pigs and chickens).

¹⁶For further discussion of the government's many different kinds of regional councils, see Fox (2007a).

¹⁷These councils were originally designed by reformist federal policymakers to be grassroots pro-accountability watchdogs, and they quietly hired hundreds of radical community organisers to launch them. This accountability strategy used the old-fashioned kind of transparency as a tool – regular, direct inspection of warehouse stocks and store deliveries. See Fox (1992, 2007a).

Meanwhile, the more radical wing of Guerrero's rural civil society transformed itself into the Popular Assembly of the Communities of Guerrero (APPG), following the example set by the widely-known 2006 convergence of social and civic movements in the neighbouring state of Oaxaca.¹⁸ The APPG brought together grassroots resistance movements, including challenges to displacement by government mega-projects such as the 'Parota' hydroelectric dam and mining projects in the center-north region of the state.¹⁹

The state continued to keep autonomous alternative development organisations on the defensive, weakening their efforts to sustain state-wide coalitions. This situation did not change, even after the first-ever opposition party victory in the 2005 elections for governor. The new PRD governor did not lead a political opening, nor did his government favour participatory rural development strategies. For example, his state government continued to reject the legitimacy of the Community Police, and persisted with the electorally-driven distribution of subsidised chemical fertilisers. With the doors to the system remaining closed, protest groups that used radical tactics to pursue immediate material demands gained ground.

This history of state-peasant movement relations in Guerrero can be described as a series of collective campaigns that attempted to bring together politically diverse autonomous regional organisations. The history told in the preceding pages is synthesised in Figure 1's timeline, which illustrates the ebb and flow of waves of mobilisation from below, meeting with alternating patterns of repression and partial openings from above. Figure 1 depicts two decades of initiatives to 'scale up' the state's peasant movement along the horizontal axis, beginning with the opening of the early 1980s.²⁰ The horizontal axis also indicates each governor's term in office, as well as key turning points, such as the 1988 presidential campaign, the 1992 reform of the land rights clause of the Constitution, the 1994 Zapatista rebellion and the 1995 *Aguas Blancas* massacre. The vertical axis suggests each campaign's varying degrees of political impact. Notably, in spite of the repeated frustration of rural civil society initiatives, movement activists repeatedly came back and tried again in their struggle to hold the state accountable.

Though the efforts at state-wide pluralistic convergence among grassroots organisations depicted in Figure 1 were certainly not the only forces for rural democratisation in the state, their pattern of ebb and flow does serve as an indicator of the shifting political weight of autonomous rural civil society in Guerrero. Figure 1 does not depict many sector-specific campaigns and initiatives that addressed issues of environmental defence, human rights, education and culture, and participatory local governance. Though the grassroots building blocks of these campaigns differ widely in terms of their ideologies and tactics, they repeatedly tried to come together

¹⁸Government repression of a teachers' union protest in Oaxaca had triggered a broad civic uprising against a governor widely seen as illegitimate, leading to a 'dual power' situation that involved months of mass street demonstrations, city-wide barricades, and government torture. See, among others, Esteva (2007).

¹⁹Another rural civil society response by activists and educators was to invest in grassroots leadership development. In 2004, they launched the Peasant University of the South (Universidad Campesina del Sur, or Unicam). This project seeks to legitimise the knowledge of local producers and communities, as well as to provide training and education to groups traditionally excluded from the formal education system.

²⁰Figure 1 draws on the experience of Carlos García Jiménez, as a direct participant or observer. See also García Jiménez (2000a, 2000b).

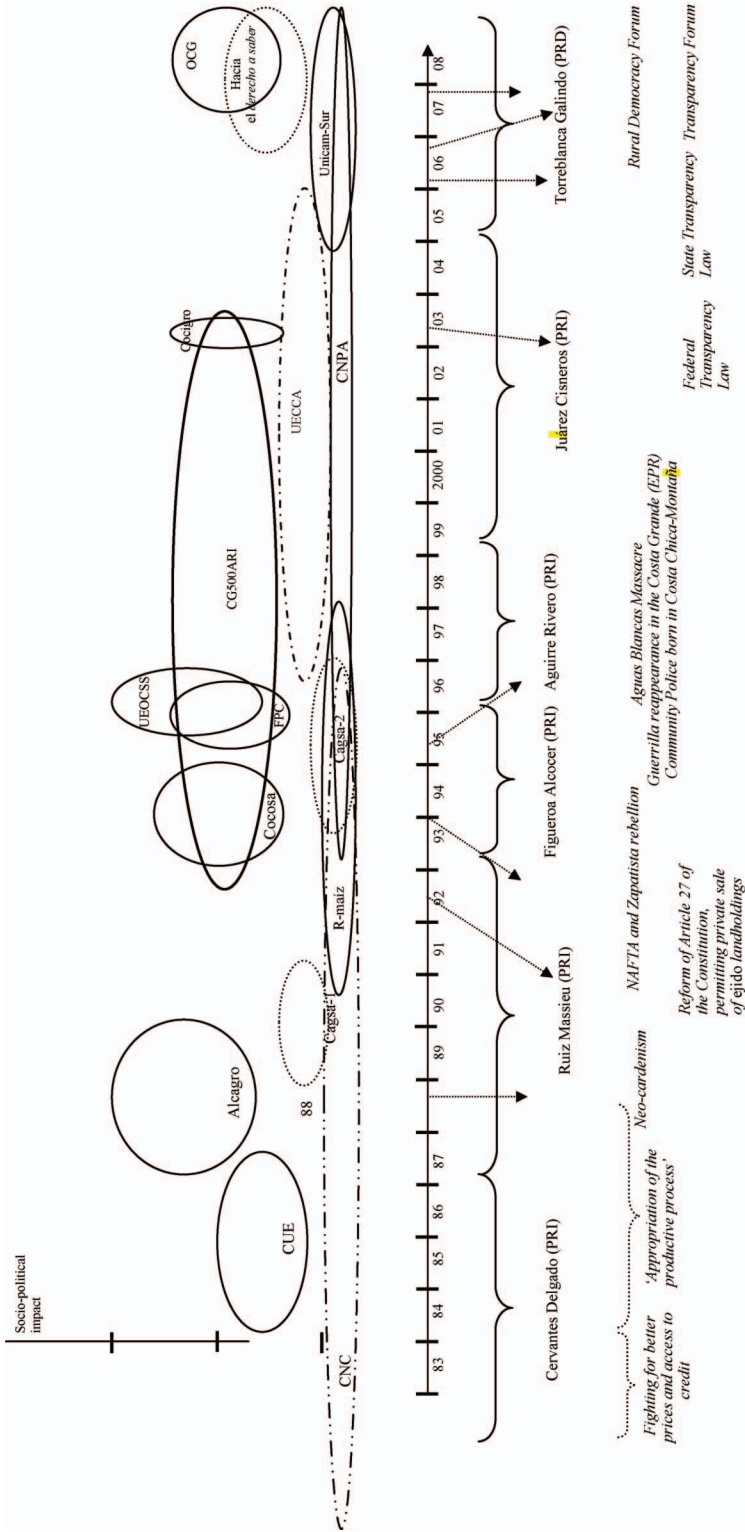


Figure 1. Autonomous peasant and indigenous coalitions in Guerrero, 1984–2008.

Notes: CUE: *Ejido* Union Coordinating committee (Coordinadora de Uniones de Ejidos); Alceagro: Alliance of Autonomous Peasant Organizations of Guerrero (Alianza de Organizaciones Campesinas Autónomas de Guerrero); Cagsa: Agricultural Marketing Organization of Guerrero (Comercializadora Agropecuaria de Guerrero, Sociedad Anónima); R-Maiz: Network of Corn Marketing Organizations (Red de Productores de Maiz de Guerrero); Cocosa: Agricultural Marketing Services Broker (Corredor Comercial y de Servicios Agropecuarios); FPC: Permanent Peasant Forum (Foro Permanente Campesino); CG500ARI: Guerrero Council '500 Years of Indigenous Resistance' (Consejo Guerrerense '500 Años de Resistencia Indígena'); UUECCS: State Union of Peasant Organizations of the Southern Mountains (Unión Estatal de Organizaciones Campesinas de la Sierra del Sur); UUECCA: State Union of Community Food Councils (Unión Estatal de Consejos Comunitarios de Abasto); CNPA: National Coordinating Committee 'Plan de Ayala' (Coordinadora Nacional 'Plan de Ayala'); Coogro: Peasant and Indigenous Coordinating Committee of Guerrero (Coordinadora Campesina e Indígena de Guerrero); Unicam-Sur: Peasant University of the South (Universidad Campesina del Sur); OCG: Peasant Organizations of Guerrero (Organizaciones Campesinas de Guerrero).

to hold the government accountable, and to make peasant and indigenous voices heard in the policy process. Meanwhile, the rural population has repeatedly discredited the political class through the ballot box, yet this expression of voice has yet to translate into a democratisation of governance. Indeed, in the 2008 elections rural citizens turned the PRD out of most of the town halls that they had won in 2005. Yet human rights defenders are still assassinated with impunity.²¹ So far, the pattern of state–society relations shows that while the regime has changed, the state has not.

The political construction of the public's right to know: top-down and bottom-up²²

This review of rural democratisation initiatives in Guerrero frames the following analysis of recent rural campaigns that demand the 'right to know' as a democratic right. This umbrella concept encompasses demands that range from the classic human rights campaign call for 'where are they?' (referring to the disappeared), to include independent electoral monitoring and calls for public environmental impact assessments, as well as indigenous rights activists' long-standing demands for the right to interpreters and autonomous broadcast media.

Yet it was not until Mexico's recent experience with turnover in presidential power that official right-to-know discourse was translated into a comprehensive law that specified how those rights could be exercised in practice. The law emerged from an unusual convergence between civil society intellectuals and media leaders, congressional leaders, and legal reformers newly-embedded in the executive branch of government (Escobedo 2004). After a vigorous debate, the issue had gained such a remarkably broad base of support that Congress passed the final compromise version unanimously. The law mandates a very explicit presumption in favour of disclosure. Unless documents are in a category specifically covered by a clearly bounded exception, the law mandates that all information produced by the federal government should be publicly accessible. Many of Mexico's information rights provisions are relatively 'user-friendly'.²³

In order to avoid the need for a new constitutional reform, the law's scope was limited to the federal government, and the jurisdiction of the new agency (IFAI) was limited to the executive branch. This facilitated the congressional consensus, but left huge gaps. As a result, Congress re-opened the issue only four years later, passing a constitutional amendment in mid-2007 that extended minimum standards to other levels and branches of government. After the one year compliance period ended, most state governments had successfully resisted this new mandate, favouring merely pro forma transparency laws.

Public debate over the limits and possibilities of Mexico's information access reform often mentions its apparently narrow 'social base', in terms of the profile of its users. Most appear to be urban professionals in the media, private, public, and academic sectors, disproportionately located in the capital. The access system is

²¹Note the February 2009 assassinations of two leaders of the Organization for the Future of the Mixteco People (Habana and Ocampo 2009).

²²This section draws on Fox *et al.* (2007), which includes detailed discussion of debates over information rights for specific issue-based public interest campaigns (i.e., human rights, environment, health rights, etc.).

²³For links to international comparative discussions, see www.foiadvocates.net and www.freedominfo.org.

primarily on-line, which limits the user population to those with some degree of computer access. The information request system also requires a relatively high level of prior familiarity with how the public sector works in order for users to be able to frame and direct their requests with precision (Fox *et al.* 2007). Statistics on the usage of the access system (so far) reveal that a relatively small number of people are filing the majority of the requests (Guerrero Amparán 2007).

There is indeed a long way to go before a substantial fraction of the citizenry learns how and why to exercise their information rights. Yet the urban bias in the exercise of information rights through the IFAI's web-based system does not constitute evidence that rural citizens are not interested in the right to know. Experience with other public information access reforms suggest that even Mexico's most low-income rural citizens are willing to use them when they see a direct connection to their daily lives. Mexico's public sector has also designed other tools for citizen access to information, including agencies' obligatory disclosure requirements, as well as a growing new system of 'citizen attention' windows and social audit mechanisms.²⁴ Some of these offices combine information access and ombudsman functions, as in the case of the government flagship social welfare programme's Citizen Attention programme, which each year receives more information requests than are directed to the *entire* executive branch.²⁵ This contrast clearly reveals a huge pent-up demand for information among the most excluded sectors of the population, most notably low-income rural women. In addition, Mexican citizens file thousands of complaints with state and federal human rights commissions, which also constitute a tangible demand for a kind of transparency ('answerability'). These claims are calls for one government agency to admit that another branch of the government violated human rights.

Information rights and public interest campaigns in Guerrero

Since Mexico's federal law was passed, many civil society organisations and journalists have worked to encourage its implementation, but most have focused on advocacy and media strategies centered in the national capital. Rural civil society organisations have only just begun to experiment with strategies to test its relevance for their agendas. They face at least two main practical challenges: first, to link information rights directly with the livelihood and rights issues that dominate the agendas of most grassroots organisations. Second, rural civil society organisations must disentangle the different roles of federal, state, and municipal governments, in a context in which only the federal reform provides the basic rights and practical tools needed to make public access effective in practice.

Prior to the state of Guerrero's passage of its first information access law in early 2006, many local civil society organisations had already brought the issues of

²⁴This is consistent with the comparative literature on transparency institutions, which finds that targeted approaches that are oriented to specific user groups generate the most demand (Fung *et al.* 2007).

²⁵In 2006, for example, the Oportunidades social programme received more than 87,000 formal 'citizen demands' for information (including complaints), in spite of possible fears of reprisals. These women's concerns were registered mainly by phone and in writing – in sharp contrast to the 60,000 IFAI information requests that were directed to many dozens of national agencies, primarily from urban men with high levels of formal education (Fox and Haight 2007, Fox 2007a).

transparency and accountability into their agendas. Several were calling for a greater 'culture of transparency'. They worked to monitor electoral manipulation of government social programmes and to bolster citizen participation in local government, and they campaigned for the state government to follow the federal example and pass its own transparency law. In 2004, the state congressional representatives from the National Action Party (PAN) and Southern Revolutionary Party began to present meagre proposals for a state transparency law, though Congress did not respond to civil society calls for open discussion. Guerrero's state law turned out to be one of the weakest in Mexico (Gómez Gallardo 2007, 286, IFAI 2007).

In response to the fact that few people knew that the law had even been passed, several organisations took initiatives to begin to make citizens' right to know effective. In September, 2006, the grassroots support organisation Self-Managed Social Development Promoters (PADS) organised a series of meetings designed to bring together various organisations to convene a state forum to exchange ideas about how they could possibly use the new transparency law.²⁶ The state congress's Commission for Agricultural Development and Fisheries, as well as the state government's Access to Information Commission (Caipegro), agreed to participate in the event as well, which was held in the state congress's library. This venue provided an unusual degree of official legitimacy for an independently-organised civil society conference, allowing participants to exercise their voice on an unusually level 'playing field'.

This state-wide forum was entitled 'Toward a Democratic and Transparent Guerrero' – a public message that those two goals remained out of reach. More than 140 representatives from 34 indigenous, peasant, environmental, and human rights organisations participated, along with 12 public agencies. They exchanged experiences about efforts to access government information. Excerpts from the plenary session were broadcast live on a state-wide radio station, and therefore reached rural communities.

Participants reached consensus on advocating for a stronger state law, called for municipal information access, made a plan to carry out regional and municipal workshops to train communities on how to exercise their right to know effectively, called for transparency in government funding of civil society organisations, urged citizen monitoring and evaluation of government programmes, called for public information to be published in a way that takes into account linguistic diversity (to reach non-Spanish-speaking indigenous communities), and even expressed support for opponents of the Parota dam and for freedom for political prisoners in Oaxaca. Participants also agreed on a series of precise, issue-specific resolutions that stressed the need to make public who benefits from government programmes in each sector, as well as demands for the right to public participation in their management and oversight and the need for interpreters for indigenous language-speakers.

²⁶Six autonomous, community-based and grassroots support organisations convened the information rights forum (PADS; Sociedad de Producción Rural 'Sinécio Adame'; Centro de Capacitación, Investigación, y Estudios Estratégicos; Tadeco; Centro Operacional para el Fortalecimiento de Iniciativas Sociales; and the Universidad Campesina del Sur). See Fox *et al.* (2007, 300).

When one reviews the list of participating organisations, and then assesses the list of resolutions, one of the most striking patterns to emerge is the convergence between very different branches of Guerrero's rural civil society, from all across the state. While all the participating social organisations were broadly autonomous, insofar as they were not subordinated to the government or political parties, they ranged politically from very pragmatic, non-ideological groups that focus mainly on community-based economic development to those engaged in tense contestation, whether resisting an imposed government infrastructure project, defending victims of human rights violations, or providing community-based public security – including the indigenous Community Police of the Costa Chica-Montaña region and the Community Coordinating Committee against the 'La Parota' dam. This range of participation and the breadth of consensus suggested that information rights could become an issue with the potential to bring together Guerrero's dense but still regionally and ideologically fragmented rural civil society.

Collective campaigns and information rights

Following Guerrero's long history of civil society efforts to hold local, state, and federal authorities accountable for their decisions, by 2007 they increasingly claimed their right to public access to information as an instrument in their issue-specific campaigns. In particular, the issue of corruption brought people together across class lines, both for the practical reason of improving basic public services, and for the principled reason of challenging government officials' impunity. For example, critics of corruption in the educational system revealed that bureaucrats secretly spent vast sums of public funds on luxury meals, while claiming that they lacked the resources needed to address underserved rural communities' requests for additional teachers. Organised parents in the Acapulco-Coyuca region called on educational authorities to report on how much teachers are paid, how many can teach in indigenous languages, and how many are actually assigned to classrooms (because the state has many 'ghost' teachers on the payroll). Rank-and-file dissidents also charged teachers' union leaders with diverting their union dues to a political party. Indigenous women in Tlapa, after monitoring the local government doctor's absenteeism and imposition of illegal user fees, called on the Health Ministry to stop the abuse of power. Low-income urban residents, after making co-payments for state government housing improvement packages, followed the money and found that a government official gave their money to the PRI peasant organisation, the CNC. Community forestry organisations charged state and federal officials with manipulating accounts to delay delivering their project funds.

Perhaps the most striking trend during this period, based on coverage in the local news media, is the emergence of numerous municipal citizens' movements, which bring people together across social classes, and sometimes across urban-rural divides, to hold local government authorities accountable for the use of public funds – in a context of growing resources flows to local governments in the name of 'social investment'. These new 'Citizens' Fronts' drew on the state's long history of civic insurgency, challenging authoritarian mayors' control over outlying villages (Fox 2007a, 2007c). In a growing number of municipalities, rural citizens marched on town halls, claiming their right to know how public funds have been spent, why so

little reached their villages, or why those public works that were built were so consistently shoddy or inoperative.²⁷

By late 2008, two years after the first efforts to try to use information rights to support rural social movements, most had just begun to draw on right-to-know discourse – and few had tangible results to show for it. Yet two different mass-based collective campaigns tried to make *strategic* use of information rights. Both are grassroots, non-partisan movements that have widespread support in approximately twenty very low-income villages, each reaching across a compact sub-region. However, in the first case the right-to-know was pursued primarily by NGO allies, while in the second, movement advisors worked directly with communities to help them to take up the demand themselves.

The ‘La Parota’ anti-dam movement

The first case brings together issues of land rights, rural mass protest, legal defence strategies, and the use of information rights as a strategic resource. This case is especially relevant here because the campaign against the proposed La Parota dam was one of the first efforts in Mexico to use the new federal information access law in favour of a mass protest movement – and they were successful.

The Council of Ejido and Communal Farmers in Opposition to La Parota (CECOP) brought together 20 agrarian reform communities in 2003.²⁸ The proposed dam threatened to directly affect an estimated 25,000 people, not counting the downstream impacts (Amnesty International 2007, Tlachinollan n.d.). The campaign combined grassroots protests and national networking with other dam-affected communities with legal defence strategies. The grassroots mobilisations won substantial support among the affected communities, in spite of human rights violations. The region’s leading human rights organisation, Tlachinollan, challenged police harassment of CECOP activists and encouraged international scrutiny (e.g., Tribunal Latinoamericano del Agua 2006). Based in Mexico City, the Mexican Center for Environmental Law (CEMDA) used federal information access reforms to generate evidence to bolster the court case against the dam itself. The legal strategy won tangible victories – including a 2006 agrarian court ruling that overruled agrarian community decisions because of government manipulation, and a 2007 injunction that suspended construction. The Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) had to suspend its bids for construction contracts. In spite of public claims by the CFE director, they lost all of the first seven legal decisions (Tapia 2008).

Government opacity and disinformation efforts put alternative information politics at the top of the dam resistance agenda (Martínez Esponda 2007b). The misrepresentation of the facts by CFE officials, as well as government efforts to divide communities, obliged the grassroots campaign to focus on providing alternative information to affected people. Conflicts between local supporters and opponents led in one case to four deaths. Though dam supporters were in the minority, they appeared to have been armed by the CFE.²⁹ Legal challenges to the

²⁷For case studies of regional and local rural democratisation movements in Guerrero, see Canabal (2002) and Dehouve (2001).

²⁸See Emanuelli (2006) and Martínez Esponda (2007a, 2007b).

²⁹See case details at http://www.cemda.org.mx/artman2/publish/Litigio_Ambiental_3/Resumen_del_Caso.php [Accessed 2 March 2009].

official community assemblies revealed that signatures on relocation ‘agreements’ had been falsified, non-members had been allowed to vote, and that assemblies were not legally convened, leading the federal Agrarian Courts to nullify those decisions in 2006.

Meanwhile, CEMDA’s legal strategy relied heavily on exercising formal information rights under the new federal law, submitting 53 information requests (mainly to the CFE and the Environment Ministry). They also filed eight official appeals, challenging the denials of information by the CFE, as well as by two universities that had been involved in environmental impact assessments.³⁰ In the process, according to CEMDA’s lawyers, they gained access to the environmental impact assessment, which revealed huge gaps as well the illegality of the authorisation to proceed with construction.³¹ The lack of a permit for changing land use revealed that the CFE had cleared forest land without environmental clearance. From the Defense Ministry, CEMDA discovered a CFE permit to use explosives (which revealed that construction was imminent, helping to justify an injunction). When the CFE responded to the request for the socio-economic impact studies needed to inform decisions about the relocation of the affected communities, it declared the information ‘non-existent’, which proved that both the CFE and the Environment Ministry had authorised the project without consultation with or consent from the communities that would lose their land (Rodríguez Bribiesca 2007).

The anti-dam movement remained in defensive posture. CECOP was led largely by leaders known as ‘spokespeople’, and many local agrarian community and village leaders supported the struggle. In their direct action repertoire, CECOP’s male leadership sometimes encouraged female contingents to go first in demonstrations in an effort to limit police violence – which occasionally worked. Traditional gender roles persisted.

This anti-dam movement is a classic case of a coalition between an agrarian social mobilisation to defend land rights and professional public interest groups. In the process, the grassroots movement just barely began to develop sufficient familiarity with the complexity of the state apparatus and legal system to begin to exercise information rights directly themselves. Indeed, movement leaders had different positions regarding whether this approach was worthwhile. To some, to attempt to use institutional procedures to extract official information implied undue engagement with the state and was not compatible with their resistance stance. Others were much more open to this effort, and they began to participate in the incipient information rights movement.

By late 2008, a new court decision, based on technicalities, suggested that the judicial strategy had run its course. While CECOP and CEMDA weighed the

³⁰The information politics dimension of the conflict was underscored by two of the United Nations’ special rapporteurs for human rights, whose site visit report diplomatically reminded the Mexican government of its commitments to international treaties and national laws, under which it is obliged to ‘guarantee freedom of information, consultation and free, prior and informed consent’ for people threatened with displacement (Stavenhagen and Kothari 2007). Stavenhagen and Kothari are UN special rapporteurs for indigenous and housing rights, respectively. They noted in particular the lack of public access to the environmental impact assessment and the lack of a social impact assessment, as well as the community divisions aggravated by lack of adequate information. In response, Mexican government pressures led the country office of the UNDP to come out in favour of the dam (Ramírez Bravo 2009).

³¹See CEMDA/AIDA (2007).

prospects of pursuing a legal campaign through international human rights institutions, federal government officials began to hint that budget problems might postpone the project indefinitely. Yet in early 2009, CEMDA and CECOP revealed that the Federal Electricity Commission's response to a precisely targeted public information request explicitly recognised that it lacked valid legal permits, that the agrarian assembly decisions had been legally voided, and that it had not been able to request the necessary change of land-use approvals (since negotiations for community approval remained suspended).³² The dam project appeared to be blocked, and opponents turned their attention to reweaving the damaged social fabric within divided communities.

*The health rights campaign of the Women's Network for the Common Good*³³

A second case of the strategic use of information rights in rural Guerrero involved a peasant women's health rights campaign, concerned with holding the government accountable for poor services, abuses of power, community divisions, and imposed user fees that they discovered were illegal. This campaign was led by the Women's Network for the Common Good, affiliated with the Union of Communities of Eastern Coyuca de Benítez and Western Acapulco (Unión de Pueblos, or UP). Many of these approximately 500 women rely on the state government's village clinics and are also 'beneficiaries' of the federal government's flagship social welfare programme, known as *Oportunidades*.

The UP, launched in late 2006, brings together over 20 low-income peasant communities in the coastal lowlands. While much of their corn production is for household consumption, for several years they had also tried cooperative marketing of corn, limes and mangos, with limited results. Community leaders then recognised that their problems went beyond agriculture and market access and broadened their approach to focus on developing a more integrated regional development plan. Their participatory planning process produced a detailed strategy that addressed both pressing short-term issues, such as demands for potable water and access roads, as well as longer-term development issues, such as natural resource management, sustainable crop production and marketing, social development, education, culture, access to justice, and women's rights (García Jiménez 2007). The organisation is also engaged with larger-scale peasant politics through their affiliation with one of Mexico's longstanding national networks of regional agrarian movements, the 'Plan de Ayala' National Coordinating Committee (CNPA), which is named after Zapata's 1911 land reform plan.

Leadership is widely shared in the UP; 28 community leaders are involved in the executive committee, an oversight committee, and issue-based working groups. The Women's Network is led by four women from three rural communities, and their stated goal is to, 'Promote the defense of women's economic, social, and cultural rights, and the involvement of women in the development of the region through the perspective of gender' (García Jiménez 2007, 134). They led off with women's

³²See Ramírez Bravo (2009) and information request 1816400178008, accessible via Infomex at <http://www.ifai.gob.mx> [Accessed 8 March 2009].

³³Co-authors García Jiménez and Haight participated directly in this campaign as advisors, together with Susana Oviedo, Lourdes Rodríguez and Louise Ashton.

economic empowerment strategies, including 15 community-based savings and loan associations, as well as productive projects that prioritise diversification and self-sufficiency through backyard animal and vegetable production.

The Women's Network's concern for bolstering the economic foundations of women's power also led them to address the government social welfare programme that provides direct payments to much of their membership. This programme, initially known as *Progresa*, became internationally known in the late 1990s for its 'conditional cash transfer' approach. This policy strategy used census data to target low-income communities and then applied household surveys to identify low-income families. Mothers in families considered eligible then receive regular cash payments, conditioned on children's consistent school attendance, regular preventative health check-ups, and lectures. Policymakers assumed that mothers would be more likely to invest the additional income in the children, and external evaluation did find that diets improved. The payments accounted for between 20–30 percent of family income, with payments increasing as children advanced to higher grades in school (paying more for girls). By 2004, the government had changed the programme's name to *Oportunidades* and had expanded its coverage to reach five million Mexican families (or an estimated 25 million people, one quarter of the total national population).³⁴

Oportunidades operations are controlled directly by federal officials in Mexico City – in contrast to the trend towards greater decentralisation of other programmes to the states, such as health service delivery (e.g., Homede and Ugalde 2006). This approach provides some degree of insulation from partisan pressures to use the programme for electoral manipulation. While local elected officials do not select programme participants, local doctors and teachers are responsible for monitoring and reporting on beneficiary compliance with programme requirements. This means that grassroots potential to hold doctors and teachers accountable for abuses is undermined by their control over whether the payments will continue.³⁵ Within the Coyuca region, local organisers estimated that approximately 80 percent of families are enrolled in the programme.

Even though the conditional cash transfer programme now constitutes one of the most important points of direct contact between the central state and millions of the poorest families in Mexico, most male-led membership organisations and NGOs do not address it. Peasant movement organisers often deride the programme as a paternalistic palliative, yet few dare to challenge it directly, given that it looms so large in family incomes. Many activists implicitly assume that to work directly with 'beneficiaries' to address the programme's practical problems would give it unwarranted legitimacy. In addition, since the programme is gender-focused by design, and since few male-led rural social organisations prioritise gender issues, the programme does not rank highly on their agenda. While many local women report that receiving direct payments allows them to meet household needs with greater certainty, some men feel threatened as women become more active in family decision-making.

³⁴For extensive official evaluations carried out by universities and research centers, see www.oportunidades.gob.mx.

³⁵For further discussion of this issue and *Oportunidades* more generally, see Fox (2007a), among others.

Because the vast majority of the members of the Women's Network receive *Oportunidades*, and because economic empowerment is central to their overall strategy, the welfare programme has become a focal point for them – in contrast to many other grassroots women's organisations, which have been divided by the programme.³⁶ Women leaders of the network began asking the UP's technical support advisors to provide workshops to discuss several problems they were confronting specifically related to the public health services linked to *Oportunidades*. They wanted access to reliable information about their rights, both vis-à-vis their local health centres and as recipients of *Oportunidades*. While the programme provides beneficiaries with more information than any other public programme (through training sessions, etc.), in practice the focus is primarily on beneficiary *obligations* to the programme, and little information is provided about beneficiary rights or the government's obligations for service delivery.

The first series of workshops, in early 2007, created a space for women to exchange concerns about the consistent lack of medicines and supplies in rural health centres and the doctor's requirement that they pay for any prescriptions and basic exam supplies. At the same time, community leaders reported that *Oportunidades* beneficiaries are asked to make a 'voluntary' contribution of US\$1–2 each to cover the costs of the health centres' electricity, gas, potable water, and basic maintenance.³⁷

The imposition of these de facto user fees turns out to be widespread in rural Guerrero.³⁸ In addition, *Oportunidades* uses one of its few institutional channels for community 'voice' to collect the user fees. The programme designates one of each village's 'beneficiaries' to be the local 'spokesperson' (*vocal* in Spanish), who acts as the liaison between the local health center staff and programme beneficiaries. In practice, these *vocales* represent the programme to the participants rather than vice versa. Three related issues provoke community divisions and tension. First, while the health centre belongs to the community as a whole, only *Oportunidades* beneficiaries are being asked to pay for treatment. Second, since they are not actually forced to contribute, not all *Oportunidades* recipients pay into the fund. Moreover, the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of these funds causes further conflict between programme recipients and their official spokesperson, and this issue became one of the Women's Network's main complaints.

Many women also expressed concern about absenteeism on the part of their clinics' doctors and nurses, which obliges villagers to pay to travel to urban areas to seek private medical attention. Together with the utility bills, total health-related expenses end up consuming most of the basic *Oportunidades* transfer payments. In addition, clinic staff treat non-*Oportunidades* participants like second class citizens, charging them US\$2 for clinic visits and often sending them to wait at the end of the line. They are seen only if the doctor has time left after seeing *all* of the *Oportunidades* patients first (and before he or she left his or her post early to attend to his or her private practice in the city).

³⁶An early critique by Mexico's National Network of Rural Women's Organizers was an exception, focusing on the programme's divisive impact on pre-existing cooperatives (Red Nacional 2000).

³⁷Additionally, *Oportunidades* beneficiaries report that in Ejido Viejo, the government power company charged the health center at the commercial rate, as though it were a private store.

³⁸Indigenous women in the Tlapa region came together to express similar concerns at the same time (González Benicio 2008).

The grassroots demands for information were clear and well articulated. The Women's Network wanted to know: What are the rules governing basic public health services for rural poor communities? What services are supposed to be provided? How does this relate to *Oportunidades*, and what exactly do the programme rules say about 'voluntary' contributions? Is it true that health services should only be free to *Oportunidades* beneficiaries? What are the medicines and supplies the health centres should have available at all times, and how often are they supposed to be supplied? What are the hours the health personnel should be available? Is it really the community's responsibility to pay for the electricity, gas, water, and maintenance of the health center? Doesn't the government provide a budget for the community health center? If so, how is it being spent?

The UP's technical support team followed up with an information access strategy to determine the basic public health rights that officially apply to poor rural communities. The results reached the members of the Women's Network through follow-up workshops and popular education materials. The results of the federal information requests revealed a series of health-related laws, ministry regulations, and programme operating procedures that all clearly define the basic health services to which rural communities are entitled. This included lists of the specific medicines, supplies, and services that health centres are mandated to provide free of charge, including the explicit requirement that the government must provide the health centres with basic electricity, water, and gas services.³⁹ In addition, these information requests confirmed that the *entire* low-income community, by law, is eligible for the government's official 'Basic Health Services Package'. The *Oportunidades* programme merely requires that women and their children *use* these same services that should already be available free of charge to the entire community. While the programme does have additional health-related requirements, such as the sanitation and nutrition training sessions, the regular health check-ups and exams are part of the same 'Basic Health Services Package' available to everyone. In addition, the operational rules for the *Oportunidades* programme clearly reiterate what is already established in the existing laws and regulations in terms of rights to free basic health coverage.⁴⁰ The *Oportunidades* rules also specify that the list of free medicines should be posted publicly in the clinic, along with a sign stating, 'The services of the Basic Health Services Package are free'.⁴¹

However, when it came to the issue of determining how the specific health centres in the Coyuca region are funded (or not), the information request strategy hit a major roadblock. While federal health laws and regulations apply to the entire country, the national government has turned the actual *operation* of basic health service delivery in Guerrero over to the state government.⁴² Even though federal

³⁹For details, see the Norma Oficial Mexicana NOM-178-SSA1-1998, Guerrero State Health Ministry guidelines available at <http://www.guerrero.gob.mx/?P=tramitedetalle&key=185>, the Federal Health Ministry's General Law for Health and the Social Protection of Health at http://www.seguro-popular.salud.gob.mx/descargas/marco_juridico/07_02_rlgsmpps.pdf, and specific health agreements and rules established by the Federal Health Ministry at <http://www.salud.gob.mx/unidades/cdi/nom/compi/ac24dic.html> [Accessed 2 May 2008].

⁴⁰*Oportunidades* Rules of Operation, 2008, No. 4.2.2, 6.8.1 and 6.8.4.

⁴¹*Oportunidades* Rules of Operation, 2008, No. 6.8.1.

⁴²For background on the decentralisation of health policy in Mexico, see Homede and Ugalde (2006).

funds cover almost all of the costs of the state's health services, questions of how the money is actually spent fell under the jurisdiction of the *state* transparency law.

The Women's Network's advisors attempted to 'follow the money' down to the rural village clinic level in an effort to identify why funds earmarked for basic maintenance, electricity, and supplies did not reach the rural clinics. State health officials proved very reluctant to provide the necessary data. They attempted to intimidate information requestors by visiting citizens' homes to question them on why they wanted the information, which involved budget data, rules and regulations, lists of medicines to be supplied, health care personnel names and working hours, as well as details regarding reported investments in the health centres of the region. At the time of writing, only the names, hours, and list of medicines have been provided.

The budget information that was provided turned out to be both opaque and contradictory. Dozens of follow-up information requests used increasingly precise, technical language, in an attempt to oblige the state Health Ministry to respond with reliable information. However, rather than providing copies of existing budgetary and reporting documents that would make fiscal transfers (or the lack thereof) to village clinics more transparent, state health officials generated new documents in response to requests for budget information. These documents, all accompanied by cover letters signed by the State Minister of Health himself, contain significant internal contradictions, such as budget reports of the same items that varied by millions of pesos.

Additionally, while on paper Guerrero's state government information agency is supposed to encourage other agencies to comply with such requests, in practice it did not act to promote Health Ministry compliance with the law. Meanwhile, the Health Ministry began to respond to information requests by offering massive stacks of paper files, where each sheet of paper was charged at a rate of approximately 20 cents (US) per page, in addition to 60 percent in discretionary taxes. These fees appeared to the technical team to represent an overt attempt to block public access.

The initial impacts of this effort to exercise information rights were mixed. On the positive side, hundreds of women got involved in expressing their demand for reliable information about *Oportunidades* and health rights, more than had originally participated in the women's savings and loan projects. Word spread, and shared problems with health services led to requests to the Women's Network for support for similar campaigns in communities outside the UP and in other regions.

However, knowing more about one's rights, and in fact being better informed to know when and how those rights are being violated, does not in itself improve the quality of public health services or remove illegal user fees. Precisely because the women participating in this process are largely beneficiaries of *Oportunidades*, the fear that their actions may lead to expulsion from the programme looms large in their strategy discussions about how to exercise their health rights.

While the relationship between being an *Oportunidades* recipient and demanding health rights has increased, work continues to develop specific strategies and actions that can take the use of information rights to the next stage. The UP Women's Network is currently in the process of developing strategies to combine the information rights strategy with a more systematic approach to demanding accountability and removing illegal user fees.

When one steps back to compare these two grassroots campaigns in which information rights were used to bolster struggles for other rights, three main points emerge. First is the contrast between the defensive character of the anti-dam

resistance struggle on the one hand, and the women's health rights campaign on the other. While CECOP is trying to hold the state at bay, the UP is trying to gain access to the state on its own terms. Second, each organisation takes a different approach to the role of informed participation, in terms of both the rank and file in general and the women members in particular. While the CECOP tends to mobilise women as a means to discourage government repression, with limited active participation, the UP women are the proponents of their own 'rightful resistance' strategy. Third, each grassroots process involved different relationships with urban allies. CECOP's anti-dam campaign was bolstered by highly skilled legal aid from Mexico's best environmental law NGO, based in the national capital, while the UP was supported by community organisers who were partly embedded in the organisation itself and partly based in the state capital – blurring the boundaries between urban and rural. Yet in both cases, the information rights strategy required external technical support and proved challenging for grassroots leaders to take on as their own in the short-term.

Conclusions

After two years of partnership between a small team of rural civil society activists and grassroots organisations on information rights issues, one could say that their campaign had barely reached an 'early-middle stage'. On the one hand, the right to know has become incorporated – to varying degrees – into movement *discourses* around a wide range of movement issues. On the other hand, this effort had yet to achieve tangible results in terms of increased state responsiveness – with the notable exception of the La Parota movement, where information rights bolstered a highly professional legal defence strategy.

As both radical and moderate activists began to add this 'new-style' tactic to their existing repertoire, the results were not yet clear. As one right-to-know campaigner put it, in mid-2008, 'it's a tortuous path, and we are just beginning to position the issue. It's on the agenda, but is rarely used strategically' (Interview, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 7 May, 2008). After two years of ongoing dialogue and innumerable workshops with grassroots organisations, campaigners concluded that a more fine-tuned approach was needed for mass struggles to take up the information rights issue more systematically. In the meantime, they tend to see it as 'merely interesting... They still can't clearly visualise it as a tool, they are just getting the taste for it' (Interview, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 7 May, 2008). In other words, 'they consider it relevant but don't apply it fully or systematically' (Interview, Chilpancingo, Guerrero, 7 May, 2008). They do demand information, but this claim still tends to be expressed primarily through traditional channels rather than demanded as a right. For example, in March 2008, one of the main peasant movement demands that was widely shared across diverse organisations involved the state government's subsidised chemical fertiliser programme, a holdover from authoritarian clientelist governors. Few organisations questioned the government's claims about how much it was spending on the programme or promoted a shift toward organic fertilisers. Most demands were 'immediatist', as in 'give us our share!'. At the same time, the right-to-know issue provided a bridging platform for very disparate peasant and indigenous organisations to sustain ongoing dialogue with each other across the state – in spite of substantial differences in their relationships with the government and political parties.

Grassroots movements for accountability in Guerrero are following up by more directly linking information rights activities with evidence-based demands (such as in the case of the Women's Network and gendered health rights). One strategy has been to begin to develop networks of citizen monitors and community social auditing practices that seek to prevent abuses before they occur. Their approach is to access information about official programme rules, projects, and contracts prior to the delivery of a public service (such as a municipal social investment or road construction), and to train community members to monitor compliance with official mandates.

Looking back over the 2006–8 period of action-research in Guerrero, the first stage involved experimenting to test the responsiveness and effectiveness of the state and federal government institutions charged with promoting information rights. This generally led campaigners to find that the doors were actually closed, especially because for many issues of direct concern to grassroots communities, the state government controlled how federal programmes were actually implemented.

In the second stage, right-to-know activists then turned their focus more to work with existing issue-based campaigns, framing information rights more emphatically as part of the broader democratisation agenda. In early May 2008, campaigners held a remarkable forum at the Acapulco city hall. They framed information rights in terms of bolstering the exercise of other democratic rights. The meeting created a high profile platform from which five peasant and indigenous organisations could denounce recent rights abuses by the government. The event involved over 50 participants, where 60 percent were women, and 40 percent spoke an indigenous language as their first language, and generated high interest from the local press. Joined by national NGOs, local organisations from other states, and experts, the meeting generated explicit agreements to demand that the candidates in upcoming local elections take a position on transparency and citizens' right-to-know; have civil society organisations in the state (with varying degrees of radicalism) present a proposal for how the local access to information law should be reformed in order to facilitate citizen access to public information; and to deepen training sessions in dispersed rural communities to bolster citizen capacity in exercising these information rights as part of broader campaigns to confront government abuses.

The next major campaign event addressed health rights through the right-to-know lens. In early September 2008, an unusual convergence of issue-based, rights-oriented NGOs from Mexico City, local universities, and grassroots organisations (including the UP Women's Network) held a state-wide health rights forum in Acapulco. The event drew media attention with a keynote speech from the former National Director of *Oportunidades* under the Fox Administration (2001–6), who denounced the imposition of user fees in rural clinics. Most of the more than 100 participants were women from grassroots organisations throughout the state, and they exchanged experiences on the state of public health services in rural areas. Grassroots activists, public health workers, and NGO leaders began to develop collaborative strategies to confront problems in public health service delivery. Participants agreed to launch a network of 'citizen monitors', who will work together to document and denounce violations of health rights throughout the state. To be effective, this network will need to access information about their health rights and the mechanics of the rural public health service delivery process. One of their main challenges will be to combine the documentation efforts and public awareness campaigns with tangible actions that address health rights violations. The

momentum achieved so far suggests that the right to know can be useful for ongoing initiatives to demand respect for a broader set of social, economic, and cultural rights. However, what remains to be seen is the extent to which Mexico's formal accountability mechanisms will combine the responsiveness and clout needed to translate these new, more informed demands into tangible improvements in the quality and accessibility of basic public services.

The goal of the next phase of the Guerrero right-to-know campaign is to transform the modest current initiative into a more systematic contribution to the toolkit deployed by broader movements. Some are more interested in what could be called 'evidence-based' approaches to advocacy than others. The broader challenge, however, is how to more effectively link struggles for democratic rights with the social and economic concerns that motivate citizens to participate in public affairs.

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