

Sociologist, student, and SSF-US member:

Molly Talcott, PhD candidate (Sociology, with Doctoral Emphases in Women's and Global Studies), UC Santa Barbara.

Activist collaborator:

Alfredo (Freddy) Landa Gómez, Coordinator, Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico, San Juan Guichicovi, Oaxaca.

Human Rights, Indigenous Airwaves: Advancing the Work of the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico

My PhD dissertation project traces the network of social movements in Southern Mexico struggling against the neoliberal Plan Puebla-Panama, and for a socially just form of 'development' that is fundamentally guided by a respect for human rights (social, cultural, economic, environmental, as well as individual) and the self-determination of indigenous peoples – women, men, youth, and elders of various ethnicities.

During the course of my research and participation with various organizations that are members of the coalition, *Alianza Mexicana por la Autonomía de los Pueblos* (AMAP, or Mexican Alliance for the Peoples' Autonomy), I have found that a very significant and growing part of the struggle to build an alternative form of development for Southern Mexico – which is both the most impoverished and the most heavily indigenous region – has been the formation of indigenous community radio stations.

For twelve years I have participated as an activist in the community media movement in the United States (in California, Missouri, Florida, and New York) and more recently in Mexico (in the Mixteco community of Yucubey de Cuitlahuac, Oaxaca).

In the context of my experience as both a scholar and an activist (two vocations which I view as inseparable), my contact with the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico (*Red de Radios Comunitarias Indígenas del Sureste de México*) has left me very impressed with the possibility that this growing network and movement presents for advancing human rights and resisting elite-led neoliberal investment and infrastructural projects that are certain to displace and further fragment indigenous communities of Southern Mexico.

The Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico was founded in 2004,¹ as a project of the *Union de Comunidades Indígenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo* (UCIZONI, the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus), a social organization with a broad popular base and a twenty-two year history of struggle in and for indigenous communities (which include Mixe/Ayuuk, Zapotec, Huave, and Zoque ethnicities) in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.

¹ Originally, the Network began under the name, the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of the Isthmus (*Red de Radios Comunitarias Indígenas del Istmo*), but has since expanded to include stations outside the isthmus region, including stations in the states of Chiapas and Veracruz, hence the name change.

About to celebrate only its third anniversary, the Network – which links together ten radio stations – has carried out various activities in order to strengthen the existence and effectiveness of indigenous community radio stations in Southeastern Mexico, such as: capacity-building workshops that are both technical and substantive in nature, the creation of human rights-based programs and radio spots, and exchanges with independent media activists in Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico.

Radio Ayuuk, located in San Juan Guichicovi, Oaxaca, is one key member station of the Network. *Radio Ayuuk*'s coordinator, Alfredo (Freddy) Landa Gómez, is also the coordinator of the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico. I have conducted several interviews with participants in *Radio Ayuuk*, a station which is run democratically by indigenous youth, both women and men. In the process, I came to learn that *Radio Ayuuk* has begun a project to create a community television station in San Juan Guichicovi as well. However, this requires substantially more resources than are presently accessible to the Network. In fact, I have been astonished at how much the Network, and *Radio Ayuuk* in particular, have accomplished with severely limited resources and very little audio equipment.

Most recently, at the National Conference of the Peoples' Resistances, convened by AMAP in Nueva Tenochtitlán, Oaxaca, on May 20, 2007, the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico joined with other independent, community, and alternative media producers to form the *Frente Nacional de Comunicadores Alternativos* (National Front of Alternative Communicators) in order to further build alliances with writers, print journalists, videographers, and web-based media-makers.

It is notable that there is broad support within the larger movement (led by AMAP) for indigenous autonomy and human rights for the growing community radio movement, which some call "the fourth power." The Declaration of Nueva Tenochtitlán, on which all participants agree by consensus, states:

This Conference enthusiastically protests against the harassment that community radios suffer daily and demands the repeal of the Televisa Law, which cancels the right of indigenous peoples to rely on their own communications media.

The harassment of community radio producers and stations in Mexico represents an abuse of power at the state and federal government levels, and is an indication of the threat the community radio movement presents to Mexico's unaccountable neoliberal capitalist regime that routinely violates human rights in favor of elite economic interests. Even in the face of state-sponsored, bipartisan (PRI-PAN) threats, both juridical and otherwise, the community radio movement in Mexico continues to grow in vital ways.

With this background in mind, I propose that Sociologists Without Borders-US sponsor the further development of the indigenous-led community radio movement in Southeastern Mexico by offering financial support to the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico. This would constitute a form of direct service/support for an organization that is producing impressive results with respect to advancing radical forms of grassroots human rights agendas in inclusive ways that center indigenous youth participation and pay attention to gender balance and equity.

As a scholar-activist participant in this movement, I can attest to its utter importance in creating a culture of human rights promotion, processes of conscientization, and popular forms of education that have both personal and political effects on indigenous women, youth, and men of a region of Mexico – the Southeast – that is virtually under siege by neoliberal forces of ‘development’ led by President Felipe Calderón and supported by transnational institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Furthermore, I believe that the social processes represented by the Network can provide valuable sociological lessons about the implications of grassroots formations of human rights agendas.

I have been conducting sociological research with the anti-PPP movement, of which the Network of Indigenous Community Radios of Southeastern Mexico is a part, for the past two years, during which time I have conducted seven months of field research in Southern Mexico. During the last two months (May-June 2007), I have focused my research on the emergence of community radios as an important tool of indigenous human rights-based struggles. During this time, my personal safety has been quite secure; I am well-connected with the organizers of UCIZONI, and I have been living with a family in a pueblo near Matias Romero, Oaxaca. Despite the terrible human rights record of the Mexican state with respect to journalists and activists, I remain safe and have not faced any threats that would suggest otherwise.

I am eager to conduct a public presentation on my part of this project as a sociologist studying the movement, and I also intend to credit Sociologists Without Borders with any support it may offer to the Network and to my own efforts to analyze, write about, and participate in the movement.