

ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORKING
IN MEXICO:
The Comité Nacional para la Defensa de los Chimalapas*

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In fact, for the *chimas*,
the defense of their patrimony is
a fundamental part of their history. . . .
What is new is the growing interest
of different branches of government
and of national and international groups,
which have realized the importance
of the Chimalapas.
Voces en la selva

Although often individually weak and marginalized in Mexico, environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and indigenous communities coalesced in the early 1990s around the issue of preserving the Chimalapas rain forest in southeastern Mexico. They then brought the problem to national and international attention and eventually helped force the redrawing of a proposed highway route. This research note will analyze the formation and activities of the Comité Nacional para la Defensa de los Chimalapas (CNDCHIM), a network of environmental NGOs, artists and intellectuals, activists and researchers, and representatives of forty-five indigenous communities in the Chimalapas. CNDCHIM formed in 1991 in response to a proposed highway that was to run through La Reserva El Ocote in the Chimalapas, one of Mexico's last two rain forests. The Chimalapas issue is extremely complex, entailing social justice, land

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tenure, megaprojects, federal and state politics, and environmental policy. This study will focus mostly on CNDCHIM and its relationship with the Mexican government, placing the organization within the context of agrarian conflict and the political and ecological issues surrounding the potential destruction of the Chimalapas.¹

CNDCHIM is an unusual entity in Mexican environmental mobilization because of its impact on policy. But it is also unique because the group has brought together in a relatively sustained manner the middle-class, urban-based environmental activists who in recent years have been the most visible wing of the environmental movement and grassroots indigenous, community-based groups who have long fought for local management of natural resources but are only now receiving national attention. In fact, the Comité Nacional is part of a growing trend of formal network formation among many Mexican grassroots and nongovernmental organizations. The term *formal network formation* is used here to distinguish these networks from *submerged networks*. The latter term has been used by social-movement theorists such as Alberto Melucci and María Pilar García to refer to a kind of amorphous entity that “underlies the more visible forms of collective action. . . .”² In contrast, CNDCHIM exemplifies what is termed here a *formally constituted network*: one not submerged but a higher-profile named entity with identifiable members who often view networking as an integral part of their strategy and identity.³ The word *formal* indicates an active decision to form a body that will function as a network, a grouping of individuals and organizations united around a common cause or event, information-sharing, or the need for solidarity. Such networks have relations that could be described as horizontal, overlapping, and in deliberate opposition to Mexico’s traditionally vertical political relations, like those within the ruling party and state-sponsored confederations (see Umlas 1996, esp. 10–12).⁴

Formally constituted networks are just one type of organization that has evolved during a period of political realignment and instability in Mexico. Although their degree of representativeness is sometimes questionable, their formation indicates an attempt by groups and individuals outside mainstream politics (namely parties) to organize themselves in a

1. The details of the agrarian conflict and communal organization in the Chimalapas were not covered in depth by my research but are admirably portrayed in Avila and García (1997).

2. See María Pilar García’s paraphrasing of Melucci’s definition of *submerged network* in M. P. García (1992, 161).

3. Chalmers et al. discuss a number of NGO networks in Mexico as entities unto themselves, even asserting that “these NGO networks are, in fact, a new form of NGO” (1995, 3).

4. Mexican activist and scholar Sergio Aguayo Quezada has observed that social networks “are characterized by coalitions of very small organizations whose most familiar unit is the NGO. . . . [Networks] are NGO groupings that function horizontally. . . . The membership and joint activities of networks can be modified rapidly due to the flexibility of these organizations.” See Aguayo Quezada, “Ciudadanos e instituciones,” *La Jornada*, 24 Mar. 1994, p. 6.

flexible manner that also maximizes flows of information and exchange of experiences. Because formally constituted networks exist as named entities and have identifiable members who form common goals, these networks represent a higher degree of commitment and a clearer collective identity than do interpersonal networks that remain submerged within a social-movement community. Further, because they are relatively small but often well connected to a large number of other activists, networks of this type may also represent a more efficient use of political space than do traditional mass movements. These qualities are especially useful in the Mexican context of recent years: a rapidly changing political system in which the old infrastructure and ways of "doing politics" are in turmoil but in which information is still a privileged commodity.⁵

Despite their increasing numbers, formally constituted networks remain undertheorized within social-movement analysis. CNDCHIM brings together important elements of two schools of thought on social movements: the resource-mobilization approach, which focuses in part on the special resources of its members, and the new social movement approach, which emphasizes collective identity. As a formally constituted network, however, CNDCHIM exemplifies an emerging form of social organization that requires further theoretical development. This research note will take steps in that direction by analyzing CNDCHIM's functioning simultaneously as space, structure, and agent and by discussing briefly the place of environmental networking in Mexico's changing political scene.

Among formally constituted environmental networks in Mexico, CNDCHIM is unusual in that it fulfills several conditions: it has relatively clear goals and some level of cohesion; it has coalesced around well-defined and politically sensitive issues; it draws on a reasonably wide (but not too broad) cross-section of activists; and it makes strategic use of network identity and resources (material and symbolic) and political opportunities (see Umlas 1996, esp. 248). CNDCHIM thus has had more of an impact than have many other environmental networks in Mexico on policy and the creation of political space for its "constituents" or members. The special circumstances, opportunities, and resources available to the network were crucial in determining its capacity to influence the Mexican government. Consequently, the political context in which CNDCHIM functions is an integral part of my analysis. Just as important has been the network's capacity to capitalize on this confluence of factors and to use its qualities as a network to achieve its goals. My study does not pretend to detail the relationships within local communities in the Chimalapas.⁶ Rather, it analyzes CNDCHIM as a formally constituted network and

5. I am indebted to James C. Scott for his observations on political context and to Margaret Keck for her comments on mass movements.

6. For more on this subject, see Avila and García (1997).

places it within the larger contexts of Mexican politics in the early and mid-1990s and the analysis of social movements.

Political and Ecological Background

Located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (in the state of Oaxaca) and bordering the states of Chiapas and Veracruz, the Chimalapas area covers roughly 600,000 hectares (6,000 square kilometers) and several ecosystems that include tropical cloud forests, savannas, and evergreen high forests. A refuge for several endangered species, the Chimalapas is also the upper basin of a key hydrological system and thus controls the climate of a large region in southeastern Mexico (*Ecología, Política, Cultura* 1987, 53; M. A. García 1989, 8). In sum, the Chimalapas may be the most important and best-preserved area of biodiversity in Mexico.

The Chimalapas area is also home to twelve to fifteen thousand indigenous persons of various ethnicities, including Zoque Indians, present since precolonial times. Some of their ancestors evidently bought their land from the Spanish Crown in 1687, which explains one interpretation of the name *chimalapa* as meaning *jícaras de oro* (cups of gold) (Avila and García 1997, n. 19 and p. 76).⁷ In 1967 the Mexican government, under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, finally recognized the area as the communal property of the *municipios* of Santa María Chimalapa and San Miguel Chimalapa, where Zoques form a majority of the population. But the presidential decree has not been respected.⁸ The issue of the *deslinde agrario* (drawing of communal land boundaries), which has only recently gotten officially underway, remains a key sticking point in the area.⁹

According to one source, the ecological destruction in the Chimalapas stems from the conflict over landownership and the absence of the *deslinde*, which has been “illegally confounded . . . with a border dispute between Oaxaca and Chiapas.”¹⁰ According to Miguel Angel García, regional coordinator of CNDCHIM and an anthropologist who has worked for years in the Chimalapas, cattle ranchers and lumber merchants (with the encouragement of the Chiapan government) have created this “false interstate conflict” by sending indigenous colonizers (often Tzeltal and Tzotzil Indians) into the area and thus fomenting their clash with indigenous groups already living there. Meanwhile, cattle and timber interests have advanced on the forest in recent decades and have refused to recog-

7. It is not clear whether a sale of land (as opposed to a grant of land from the crown) actually took place, although the two authors do not question the Zoques' claim to this land.

8. This abbreviated account of the geography and early history of the Chimalapas draws on many sources, but see in particular Avila and García (1997, 71–79).

9. Interview with Luis Miguel Robles Gil, member of CNDCHIM, 23 Apr. 1994, Mexico City.

10. Robles Gil and Moctezuma (1992, 5), citing Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas (1989).

nize Zoque communal property rights.¹¹ The area is also plagued by illegal trade in endangered species and the incursion of narcotraffickers.¹² All these problems have led to reduced self-sufficiency of peasant communities, climate change, soil erosion, the weakening of Zoque culture, increased social tension, and marginalization of area residents (Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas 1989, 13).

One government official from the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) has emphasized the lack of public and scholarly interest in the Chimalapas until very recently.¹³ But in fact, certain environmental organizations as well as individuals voiced concern about the fate of the area and its inhabitants several years ago. In 1987 the Mexican environmental network Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas convoked an "analysis forum" on the Chimalapas, although the Pacto failed to invite local communal leaders (Avila and García 1997, 79–80). In 1988 the Pacto and the well-known Mexican environmental organization Grupo de los Cien (more than one hundred artists, actors, and intellectuals) called on "Mexican society, international public opinion, and the Mexican government to mobilize efforts and take concrete measures for the preservation and development of such precious resources."¹⁴ They further demanded that the governments of the states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Chiapas, the Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología (SEDUE, which was SEDESOL's predecessor), the Secretaría de Reforma Agraria (SRA), and the Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos (SARH) assume their "responsibility vis-à-vis the nation" and urged the creation of an "integral development project for the area that would benefit the peasant communities involved."¹⁵ In 1989 the Pacto proposed a multi-purpose project to create a database of information on the area, to identify the factors of ecological and cultural destruction, and to come up with alternative production schemes based on appropriate technology.¹⁶

11. Interview with Miguel Angel García, Regional Coordinator of CNDCHIM and member of the Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C., 27 May 1994, Mexico City.

12. Further, the region had been threatened by the Chicapa-Chimalapa hydraulic project, a proposed series of dams to divert water in the region to the Pacific Ocean. According to Miguel Angel García, the project has been "held up due to its high cost and the lack of international financing" (García 1989, 7). Another source cites "the joint action of civil society (communities-peasant organizations-environmentalists)" as the cause of the project's suspension (Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas 1989, 12).

13. Interview with Exequiel Ezcurra, Director General de Planeación Ecológica, Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, 7 July 1994, Mexico City.

14. Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and Grupo de los Cien, "Chimalapas, Oaxaca," *Ecología, Política, Cultura* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1988):86–87.

15. *Ibid.*

16. This proposal was outlined in the Pacto document *Tendencias* (1989, esp. 14). According to Miguel Angel García, this project, which was funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), was completed. Interview with García, 27 May 1994, Mexico City.

The same year, a group was formed called the Vocalía Ejecutiva de los Chimalapas. Led by Gustavo Esteva, a founding member of several Mexican environmental and development organizations, it incorporated government representatives, environmental NGOs, Chimalapas community leaders, and representatives of the main timber company in the area (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 33). The Vocalía sought to be an “authentic space for *concertación*” that would encourage open meetings and participation and compel government entities to attend to the demands of environmentalists and *chimas* (the generic term for indigenous peoples in the area).¹⁷ Esteva eventually resigned, however, and the Vocalía dissolved in late 1990 when the group came under heavy criticism and suspicion about its handling of funds. Several environmental activists criticized its “concentration of power” and closeness to the government, while some officials accused it of being anti-government and “populist” (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 35, 59 n. 12).

Soon after the Vocalía disbanded, the *chimas* (with the encouragement of the Pacto) approached their counterparts, the Chiapan *campesinos*, to reconcile their land problems: the deslinde issue and the existence of Chiapan *ejidos* on communal lands (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 65–67). The year 1991 also marked the beginning of the official (government-sponsored) deslinde process to demarcate the communal property of the Zoques, which was originally recognized in 1967.¹⁸ In June 1991, the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transporte (SCT) announced the proposed Ocozocuahtla-Sayula toll highway, which was to bisect Reserva El Ocote in the Chimalapas, forty-seven thousand hectares of crucial biodiversity. Supported by Patrocinio González Garrido (the governor of Chiapas who later headed the Ministerio de Gobernación) and powerful economic interests in Chiapas, the highway would have shaved two to three hours off the drive from the state capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez to Mexico City. Environmental activists involved in the Chimalapas area claimed the government was also considering decreeing the area a *reserva de la biósfera*.¹⁹ This idea was rejected by both *chimas* and environmental activists because they considered biosphere reserves to be

17. Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández translate the term *concertación* as *social dialogue*. See Fox and Hernández (1992, 181).

18. See Eduardo Monteverde, “Jaque a la biodiversidad oaxaqueña,” *El Financiero*, 3 Apr. 1992, p. 47; and Miguel Ángel García, “Chiapas: Demagogia y represión,” *Viva*, no. 134 (18 June 1992):62–63.

19. It is unclear when they found this out. Although two interviewees imply that it was around late 1991 that NGOs discovered the idea of a biosphere reserve, García mentions as early as 1989 that SEDUE was already considering creating a biosphere reserve in the Chimalapas. See M. A. García, “The Chimalapas,” 8.

areas preserved only on paper, declared “protected” but without taking local human populations into account.²⁰

In response, Miguel Angel García and Luis Bustamante, an environmental activist and founding member of several NGOs and networks based in Mexico City, helped convoke a meeting in the capital in October 1991 attended by environmental NGOs and a delegation of Zoques from the Chimalapas. Out of this meeting came CNDCHIM. The main purpose of the organization was “to promote the detour or cancellation of the highway and foment the creation of a natural protected area . . . managed by the chimas” (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 67).²¹ The call for the creation of CNDCHIM appeared in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* on 31 October 1991 in an open letter to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and relevant ministers and governors. It was signed by the Pacto, the Grupo de los Cien, the environmental organization Pronatura, almost forty other Mexican environmental and human rights organizations, and by three popular singers, two university research institutes, and the municipios of Santa María Chimalapa and San Miguel Chimalapa.²² The newspaper announcement included CNDCHIM’s “Plan de Acción.” It demanded in the next two months such measures as the SRA’s immediate resolution of the agrarian deslinde, suspension of the Ocozocautla-Sayula highway project, and revocation of forest-exploitation permits given to two major timber companies. For 1992 the plan called for several steps: expanding the participatory process of campesinos in managing their ecological resources; disseminating information on the concept of an “*área natural protegida*” (an ecological reserve eventually to be run by campesinos); collecting funds for infrastructure and environmentally sustainable agricultural projects; addressing the basic needs of local residents; and laying a foundation for “a process of socio-ecological organization.”²³

20. According to García, the NGO Pronatura (with the support of the WWF) was going to propose the biosphere reserve idea to President Salinas de Gortari. Interview with M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994. In an interview on 7 July 1994, Ezcurra insisted that the government was never serious about the biosphere reserve idea. Another environmentalist recalled that certain conservationist NGOs “that lacked full information” were pressuring Salinas to decree the biosphere reserve. Interview with Luis Bustamante, National Coordinator of CNDCHIM, 16 May 1994, Mexico City.

21. Interviews with Bustamante, 16 May 1994, and M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994.

22. CNDCHIM was formally constituted several months later, on 12 Mar. 1992.

23. “¡Por la defensa de los Chimalapas!” Open letter printed in *La Jornada*, 31 Oct. 1991, p. 20. Just days later, this call to action was followed by a full-page newspaper ad proposing a biosphere reserve in the Chimalapas, signed mostly by Chiapan cattle ranchers. See “Los Chimalapas: Reserva Ecológica,” open letter in *La Jornada*, 11 Nov. 1991, p. 13. Critics note that the biosphere reserve, especially if it were a typical “reserve” (with little surveillance and few legal sanctions against invaders), would be in the interests of such ranchers. That same month, Governor González Garrido also called for the Chimalapas to be declared an “ecological reserve,” not a Reserva Ecológica Campesina. See Leticia Hernández Montoya, “Pide

Structure of CNDCHIM

CNDCHIM could be described as a somewhat decentralized national network of environmental and human rights NGOs (or their representatives), artists, scientists, activists, and Zoque community representatives, who officially head the group. Most of the NGOs are based in Mexico City. National Coordinator Bustamante handles the campaign from the capital. Regional Coordinator Miguel Angel García is based in both Mexico City and Matías Romero, Oaxaca, where he works directly with the chimas on agro-ecology projects and heads the team of professionals of the NGO Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C.²⁴ García is also a longtime member of the Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and thus serves as a link between that environmental network and CNDCHIM.

With regard to local leadership, the communities created the Consejo General de Representantes de los Chimalapas in December 1992. It consists of one representative from each of the forty-five *congregaciones* (villages or ranches, as small as two or three families) existing within the municipios of Santa María Chimalapa and San Miguel Chimalapa as well as representatives of ejidos with which these communities have reconciled. The Consejo was established to aid local leaders in gathering information and handling relations with federal and state authorities and NGOs (Robles Gil 1993, 13).

García and Bustamante remain key figures in facilitating communications among the *comuneros*, the Mexico City groups, and government officials. According to one source, a "tripartite alliance" has formed among CNDCHIM, the indigenous communities, and Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste.²⁵ The network thus provides a structure for coordinating actors from diverse backgrounds and sectors. Regarding the role of each group, García describes CNDCHIM as the "political entity, for political struggle . . . vis-à-vis the government," the Consejo General de Representantes de los Chimalapas as "an internal body of the communities, to organize themselves," and Maderas as a provider of technical advisors who work directly with these communities on agro-ecology, nutrition, and health projects.²⁶ CNDCHIM has neither president nor vice president nor treasurer, being what one member termed "a horizontal committee." While all the members seem to lend at least "moral support" and their

González Garrido declarar reserva ecológica a la región de los Chimalapas," *Excelsior*, 24 Nov. 1991, pp. 1, 4.

24. Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C. was formed in the early 1990s as an offshoot of Maderas del Pueblo, a Mexico City-based NGO working on the environment and on development through appropriate technology. ("A.C." stands for Asociación Civil, the registration status needed by an organization in Mexico to gain legal recognition.)

25. Interview with Martin Goebel, Executive Director of World Wide Fund for Nature-Mexico, 22 Apr. 1994, Mexico City.

26. Interviews with M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994 and 27 May 1994.

names to the network, most of the work is done by a handful of participants, as often happens in NGO networks.²⁷

Goals and Identity of the Network

CNDCHIM's goals are stated clearly in its 1991 Plan de Acción. The immediate goal of stopping the proposed highway from passing through El Ocote was achieved. Members have stressed that the longer-term goal of NGO activists and the local communities of establishing the Reserva Ecológica Campesina cannot be achieved until the deslinde problem is settled. More broadly, the open letter of 31 October 1991 stated CNDCHIM's overall "common objective of achieving a well-sustained policy of ecological protection and social development in the Chimalapas region."²⁸ By insisting on the resolution of the land conflict and addressing the fundamental issue of resource management and environmental planning in a particularly sensitive area of Mexico, CNDCHIM has linked its own goals to broader policy questions.

CNDCHIM and the Chimalapan comuneros have called for better living conditions and fulfillment of basic needs in the area. But they have also demanded local autonomy in resource management and "socio-ecological organization"—a profound change in social relations and in the way the national and state governments treat residents and land in the area. Such a demand echoes the call for reexamining the Mexican development model made increasingly by various citizens' movements in Mexico, ranging from indigenous groups to middle-class debtors' organizations to networks demanding a reexamination of free trade. In this case, the Reserva Ecológica Campesina entails biodiversity preservation, the participation of campesinos in resource management, the diffusion of technological innovation, and local self-sufficiency.²⁹ Thus the network has created a space not provided elsewhere for its members to advance their discussion of development models that call for substantive change, such as opposing extensive cattle ranching as inappropriate for the area.

CNDCHIM's perceived identity may differ among its members, but those interviewed seem to agree on the network's role as a multisectoral interlocutor between indigenous communities and the public sector. Bustamante describes CNDCHIM as the "interlocutor of the communities, the NGOs there, the government, and society" that provides "communication, dialogue, and information."³⁰

Perhaps as important as what members believe is the group's identity is what they think it is not. For instance, because the Vocalía was dis-

27. Interview with Robles Gil, 23 Apr. 1994.

28. "¡Por la defensa . . ." *La Jornada*, 20.

29. These points are taken from Anaya and Alvarez (1994, 63–64).

30. Interview with Bustamante, 16 May 1994.

credited, some in CNDCHIM are quick to draw a distinction between the two organizations. García states that CNDCHIM “is not a continuation of the Vocalía. On the contrary, it emerged as an alternative to the Vocalía, as a result of the bad experience.”³¹ He has also emphasized the difference between nongovernmental groups and the government, averring that CNDCHIM “is a pluralistic entity, and the government is not part of it. . . . There is a line: on one side is the government, and on the other, civil society. There will be negotiation [but] no playing the little game in which we mingle, which is where co-optation starts.”³²

Strategies and Actions

The Comité Nacional has employed various strategies in pursuing its goals. Its members have shown a certain sophistication in recognizing and exploiting key moments, important resources, the sympathy or openness of high government officials, and the support of powerful international allies. CNDCHIM has used Mexican radio, television, and the press to publicize the issue of the Chimalapas and the threats to its preservation. It has taken out full-page *desplegados* (spreads) and published in national newspapers open letters signed by prestigious intellectuals and nationally known artists who belong to or actively sympathize with CNDCHIM. To gain leverage, the organization has called press conferences, demanded meetings with federal and state officials, and brought singers or actors from the network to some of these meetings.

CNDCHIM has also identified and used “openings from above” as well as personal connections to powerful government figures. As explained by Jonathan Fox, openings from above can be fostered by the presence of reformists within state institutions and can provide opportunities for social movements, NGOs, or grassroots organizations to mobilize “from below” and press for change.³³ In particular, many Mexican environmentalists interviewed have recalled a degree of *apertura* or openness on the part of Luis Donaldo Colosio, who headed SEDESOL from its creation in May 1992 until he was named the presidential candidate of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in November 1993. One key CNDCHIM member noted that the network was able to open a channel to Colosio by using that member’s personal friendship ties to another SEDESOL official close to Colosio. He showed a certain “sympathy” for NGOs, or at least what García called a “political intelligence” about the Chimalapas case and implied costs of the proposed highway.³⁴ It is evident that Colosio

31. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994.

32. Miguel Angel García, quoted in *Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al.* (1993, 104).

33. For more on the concept of “openings from above,” see Fox, ed. (1990) and Fox (1992).

34. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994. In a more cynical vein, other interviewees

had the president's ear. Hence many activists perceived Colosio's assassination in March 1994 during his presidential campaign as a major loss for NGOs in general.

The indigenous members of CNDCHIM have employed their own strategies, having prepared the ground years earlier for the struggle to defend their natural resources. Since the 1970s, local comuneros had been protesting illegal logging in the area. For four days in 1986, several chimas held ten hostages (including the brother of the governor of Chiapas), accusing them of narcotraffic, land invasion, and illegal logging (Blauert and Guidi 1995, 209). In 1990 members of the community of Santa María Chimalapa, aided by the Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and two local indigenous organizations, drew up proposals for work projects in the area. In 1991 a group of community members occupied a state government building in Matías Romero for six days to protest the lack of progress on the land issue (Anaya and Alvarez 1994, 44). In March 1993, the communities of San Miguel and Santa María Chimalapa proposed to the government the creation of the Reserva Campesina "before they impose it on us" and demanded (in a meeting with Colosio) an environmental impact study in the Chimalapas.³⁵ But the comuneros reemphasized the need to settle the land dispute before creating the reserve. In this sense, they were trying to preempt a government that in the past had skillfully preempted environmental NGOs and many other forms of mobilization.

After several months of frustration in which the government promised (but did not deliver) the *planos definitivos* needed to complete the titling process of communal lands decreed in 1967,³⁶ almost a hundred Zoques traveled to Mexico City in December 1993 to protest the government's failure to resolve the deslinde dispute. They pitched tents and demonstrated for several days in front of the offices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). After trying but failing to get the ear of several federal government officials, they had decided to target UNEP as a potential channel to international organizations, environmental NGOs, and a national and international audience in general.³⁷ David Bray, an authority on peasant forestry organizations in Mexico, has argued that peasant groups' "desperate search for survival strategies" in the face of changing economic and productive conditions has led them to adopt an environmental stance for pragmatic reasons (Bray 1995, 189–90). In this

have argued that Colosio as the head of SEDESOL showed openness to NGOs because he was already seeking the presidency.

35. Evangelina Hernández, "Proponen comuneros la creación de la reserva de los Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 2 Mar. 1993, p. 16.

36. Rosa Rojas, "Recibirán zoques planos agrarios definitivos," *La Jornada*, 10 Oct. 1993, p. 15.

37. Informal interviews with various protesters from the Zoque community, Mexico City, 10 Dec. 1993. One protester pointed out the opposition of the Secretaría de Gobernación (then headed by former Governor of Chiapas González Garrido) to resolving the agrarian dispute.

general sense, one may also understand some of the comuneros' strategies within CNDCHIM.

During their December 1993 protest, the comuneros eventually marched to Salinas de Gortari's residence to demand a meeting with the president and various ministers. After a meeting on 16 December at the Secretaría de Gobernación, the government agreed to the Zoques' demands to create *brigadas técnicas* or *brigadas de conciliación agraria* to resolve the land conflict.³⁸ Unfortunately, the brigades' work was interrupted soon after they began in January 1994 by harassment from Chiapan ejido and communal authorities and cattle ranchers. The effort was then canceled.³⁹ The crux of the deslinde problem remains the Chiapan *núcleos agrarios* (agricultural "cores" or inholdings, including smallholder and ejido lands)⁴⁰ within chima communal lands. Of the thirty-five núcleos, twenty-seven were still being disputed in 1995 (most in eastern Chimalapas). Cattle ranchers and smallholders have even formed their own alliance to boycott the deslinde process. On 18 April 1994, the Mexican government as represented by the SRA declared that the area of San Isidro La Gringa (covering about 40,000 hectares of the Chimalapas) was the legal property of the chimas and not national property. But so far, this area in northern Chimalapas is the only part of the deslinde that has been resolved. Serious delineation problems remain in the east, and even San Isidro La Gringa has suffered from reinvasions and the presence of the Chiapan police.⁴¹

At the international level, CNDCHIM has used crucial moments, events, and allies strategically. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 (the Earth Summit), Mexico and other countries were under international scrutiny. Members of the Comité Nacional approached Salinas de Gortari to press him on the subject of the highway and the Reserva Campesina. While CNDCHIM did not succeed in getting a formal meeting with the president, these members were able to meet directly with Colosio in Rio

38. Rosa Rojas, "Resultó tensa y con fricciones la reunión sobre Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 18 Dec. 1993, p. 23; no author, "Aceptó el gobierno propuestas de comunidades de los Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 21 Dec. 1993, p. 7; and Rosa Rojas, "Acuerdan solución al conflicto agrario de los Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 22 Dec. 1993, p. 15. See also untitled documents and minutes of the meetings held to create the brigadas on 3 Jan. 1994 and 20 Dec. 1993, attended by CNDCHIM members, the Agrarian Attorney General, and representatives of the SRA, the state governments of Oaxaca and Chiapas, SEDESOL, and the communities of Chimalapas.

39. See "Chiapanecos hostigan a campesinos oaxaqueños," *El Imparcial* (Oaxaca), 24 Jan. 1994, n.p.; and Evangelina Hernández, "Impiden poderosos intereses solución en la selva de los Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 1 Feb. 1994, p. 20.

40. The term *núcleo agrario* is complex. Given the space limitations and focus of this research note, it cannot be explored here.

41. Telephone conversation with M. A. García, 27 June 1995, and interview with Bustamante, 26 June 1995.

and press their cause.⁴² Bustamante considered the Rio conference “a very special moment for Chimalapas” because the Earth Summit “helped the President become more aware and make the decision . . . to cancel the highway.”⁴³

Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, a key group member of CNDCHIM, has also used its international ties to advance its work in the Chimalapas. Funded in part by the well-known environmental organization World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Maderas has been able to use “the important international presence of the WWF to pressure Salinas,” according to Miguel Angel García. As a former director commented, the WWF-Mexico has enjoyed at times a certain political leverage within the Mexican government. García also noted that Maderas has tried to take advantage of this fact “to make Salinas see that there is international pressure, there is international interest, there are many eyes watching what is happening in Chimalapas and that he has to resolve it.”⁴⁴

Partly because of Maderas’s work over several years in the Chimalapas and García’s integral position in CNDCHIM, the Comité Nacional has access to a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge about the local situation. The importance of key individuals who serve as “nodes” for the organization, such as García and Bustamante, should not be understated. As David Knoke has observed, these nodes or connecting points of the network “link organizations and individuals within a movement” (Knoke 1990, 79)—in this example, within a larger network. In CNDCHIM’s case, they also link the network with outside organizations like the WWF and with government officials. In addition, the network’s “short communication linkages” (including fax machines) among the Zoque communities, Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, and the Mexico City groups have been central to CNDCHIM’s strategic repertoire.⁴⁵ Similarly, CNDCHIM’s communication of information to the public via press conferences and *desplegados* has been fundamental in raising general awareness of the situation.⁴⁶

In the areas of communication and information exchange, one sees most clearly CNDCHIM’s strategic use of its organization. Indeed, CNDCHIM as a network is a more effective whole than the sum of its parts, largely because of organizational use of members’ resources—knowledge, prestige, information, experience, and connections—at local, state, national, and international levels. The Comité’s Mexico City coordinators

42. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994.

43. Interview with Bustamante, 16 May 1994.

44. Interviews with Goebel, 16 Nov. 1993, and M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994.

45. See Knoke for a discussion of “short communication linkages” (1990, 139).

46. Particular NGOs whose members are active in CNDCHIM have also publicized the issue on their own. See, for example, *Especies en Peligro*, a magazine published by the environmental organization *Naturalia*, A.C.

are careful to acknowledge the Zoque representatives as the heads of CNDCHIM, just as community members have emphasized that “not just the comuneros fought for the cancellation of the original project [the highway]; rather, it was the work of the whole Comité Nacional.”⁴⁷

Finally, a crucial component of CNDCHIM’s repertoire has been to offer proposals or alternatives to government policy. Such proposals represent an important change in the strategies of Mexican environmental NGOs. In their early years, these groups often relied on *denuncia pública* and offered few solutions to the problems they were criticizing. The evolution into making alternative proposals, while incipient and uneven, is a fundamental step forward in the maturation of environmental NGOs and Mexican NGOs in general.

One example is the counterproposal to a biosphere reserve outlined in CNDCHIM’s March 1992 project proposal, “Hacia una reserva ecológica campesina en los Chimalapas: Proceso de comunicación y reflexión comunitaria.” The document includes a detailed description of the biological, social, and cultural conditions of the area, an account of local problems, and an outline of the project’s goals, strategies, methodology, and budget. The project’s main objective is to seek self-sufficiency and better living conditions for area residents. The proposal also includes workshops and fora “to guide peasants toward forming a community proposal for territorial planning” (CNDCHIM 1992, 13).

Environmental organizations involved in the Chimalapas also suggested expanding existing highways instead of building a new road, and CNDCHIM recommended a modification of the SCT’s proposed route (Robles Gil and Moctezuma 1992, 6; Robles Gil 1992b, 1). The Zoques have taken their own initiative in trying to resolve the agrarian conflict by reconciling with Chiapan campesinos (Robles Gil and Moctezuma 1992, 6; Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 65–67). Finally, the work of Maderas with Zoque communities is aimed at fomenting alternative farming methods and agroforestry to raise productivity in the area and eventually to serve as model plots for the rest of the Chimalapas. In sum, CNDCHIM functions not only as structure and space but also as agent in trying to resolve both the highway and the deslinde issues—an actor identifiable to members, nonmembers, and government officials alike.

It is this agency that sets a formally constituted network apart from a submerged network. While the latter may play a role in causing change (by bolstering a social movement), its amorphousness and fluidity generally do not allow it to function independently as an identifiable agent that brings about action. Within the broader context of social movements in Latin America, Fernando Calderón, Alejandro Piscitelli, and José Luis Reyna have asked how social actors can “relate to each other, project themselves

47. Hernández, “Proponen comuneros la creación . . .,” p. 16.

into the political arena, and participate actively in discussions about development alternatives" (Calderón, Piscitelli, and Reyna 1992, 29). The formally constituted network would seem to address each of these points in its respective roles as structure, space, and agent.

"El desvío" (The Detour): Chronology and Analysis

The emergence of CNDCHIM was followed by several months of meetings among campesinos, federal and state officials, environmentalists, and biologists to discuss the situation in the Chimalapas (Amo et al. 1992, 11–12). In April 1992, Salinas declared that the highway would not pass through La Reserva El Ocote but would take an alternate route. The next month, however, CNDCHIM called a press conference warning that the alternate route would still threaten the Chimalapas because it would run only a few kilometers southwest of Ocote, "through equally forested areas, then rejoining the original [sketched] route . . . in an ecologically unequaled zone" known as the Espinazo del Diablo (Robles Gil 1992a). Two days later, *La Jornada* published an open letter from CNDCHIM reiterating this point, demanding a serious investigation of alternative routes and a meeting with Salinas and reminding the president that Mexico had a chance to be "an example of the vanguard" at the Earth Summit in two weeks.⁴⁸

Just after the Rio meeting, the highway route was again redrawn "because of the pressure of environmental groups," according to one SCT official.⁴⁹ These changes added more than a hundred kilometers and considerable cost to the original project. In July 1992, CNDCHIM met with Santiago Oñate Laborde, the Procurador Federal de Protección al Ambiente (PFPA, the environmental attorney general), to express continuing concern about the proposed route. Soon after, Oñate announced that the road would not run through the Chimalapas and that the PFPA would conduct an environmental impact study of alternate routes.⁵⁰ In late August, Colosio announced the detour of the highway officially. The new route would now run between Ocozocuahtla, Chiapas, and Cosoleacaque, Veracruz, through areas of forest already "practically destroyed" (Robles Gil 1992c, 2). This route was finally approved by environmental groups.⁵¹ Although CNDCHIM was only part of this picture, these events indicated

48. "¡Chimalapas: La primera Reserva Ecológica Campesina en riesgo!" Open letter in *La Jornada*, 23 May 1992, n.p.

49. César Espinosa, "Desechan nuevamente proyecto de la carretera Ocozocuahtla-Sayula," *El Orbe* (Chiapas), 16 June 1992, p. 1.

50. Benjamín Flores de la Vega, "Transparente, toda acción de la Procuraduría del Medio Ambiente," *Ovaciones*, 8 July 1992, n.p.

51. Leticia Hernández, "Con inversión de dos billones, se construirá en Chiapas una autopista de 4 carriles: Caso," *Excelsior*, 29 Aug. 1992, p. 21.

the network's ability as a singular entity or agent to use the special resources of its members (including links to certain Mexican government officials and a presence at the formal proceedings of UNCED) and to wield its identity (as a network with national name recognition and ties to powerful international organizations) to press for change.

CNDCHIM and comuneros of the Chimalapas proceeded in 1993–1994 to contest the government's handling of the unresolved deslinde problem. Officials interviewed and quoted in the press seemed to agree that the redrawing of the highway not once but twice was due largely to the pressures of environmental groups, activists, and comuneros (as spearheaded by CNDCHIM). Two qualifying points should be made, however.

First, the story's events and outcome are thrown into some confusion by the fact that most of the major actors have their own version of how things happened. In many cases, individuals or groups naturally seek to make themselves come out ahead in the story. The result is something like the Japanese film *Rashomon*, in which the perception of each actor is an important part of the story, even if the different accounts seem to obscure what actually happened.

In reviewing documents and interviewing participants in the Chimalapas issue, one notices many discrepancies: between the versions of government officials and those of NGO members; among the accounts of different government officials (or former officials); and within the NGO community itself. A few examples illustrate these inconsistencies. In *La lucha por Chimalapas*, Esteva and others have emphasized the potential "unilateral declaration of a biosphere reserve in the region," and they insist that "it was not a matter of a minor or make-believe threat; the idea was included in the federal government's official plans, and the officials in charge of SEDUE had continually reiterated their intentions on this matter" (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 52). Several CNDCHIM members also made this claim in interviews.

In contrast, when asked about the Mexican government's intentions regarding the biosphere reserve, Exequiel Ezcurra, former Director General de Planeación Ecológica in SEDESOL, stated that it was not the government's idea but that of a high official who left the government in July 1992 and that within the government, "you won't find any evidence that that project was ever taken seriously." In Ezcurra's opinion, the biosphere reserve was never more than a "typical phantom-project," an idea that the government never considered serious enough to follow up on. He insists that "perhaps you will hear in interviews . . . [with] certain groups . . . that there was a very advanced [Biosphere] Reserve project that was halted, etc., as a result of the Comité Nacional's environmentalist fight. . . . But I think that is an exaggeration. . . ."52

52. Interview with Ezcurra, 7 July 1994.

Accounts also differ as to who came up with the idea of the Reserva Campesina. So many have claimed credit that it may be impossible to identify exactly where the idea originated. Both Ezcurra and Dr. Arturo Gómez Pompa, a well-known and respected ecologist who served as Asesor del Presidente en Asuntos Ecológicos del Trópico from 1992 to 1993, imply that if they were not actually responsible for the idea, they brought it to Salinas's attention and encouraged him to adopt it.⁵³ According to García, the idea "came from us and from the community . . . , above all because the government wanted to impose a biosphere reserve." In this comment, "us" refers to Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste's team, and "the community" to the indigenous communities with whom the team works in the Chimalapas.⁵⁴ Ecologist Ronald Nigh noted in 1991 that local campesinos already had a counterproposal for a Reserva Ecológica Campesina.⁵⁵

Within the government, accounts and conclusions differ as well. Gabriel Quadri, former Director General de Normatividad at the federal Instituto Nacional de Ecología (INE), calls the redrawing of the highway a "typical achievement of organized groups."⁵⁶ Ezcurra believes that "there has been a lot of mishandling [of the issue] by the press. The press believes that [CNDCHIM] blocked a highway that was going to pass through Chimalapas. And that is not accurate."⁵⁷ The chima comuneros themselves are not united with respect to the role of CNDCHIM. Splits divide both municipios regarding the *ecologistas*, with some supporting them and others denouncing them. This local contestation is not new but became more serious in 1996–1997. For example, in a desplegado from 11 October 1996 in *La Jornada*, many municipal authorities of Santa María and San Miguel Chimalapa publicly rejected the interventions of CNDCHIM, Maderas, and the Pacto. This statement calls to mind a similar event in 1994, when certain congregaciones broke away temporarily from CNDCHIM. Two researchers who have worked extensively in the Chimalapas ascribe this earlier split to the political manipulations of a SEDESOL subdelegate in Matías Romero, noting that the communities later reconciled with CNDCHIM (Avila and García 1997, 88, 91).⁵⁸ It is possible that the more re-

53. *Ibid.*, and interview with ecologist Arturo Gómez Pompa, 27 June 1994. Gómez Pompa claims the term *reserva ecológica campesina* came from his group, Programa de Acción Forestal Tropical (PROAFT), a program proposed and created by the government but run by an NGO, while the concept of the *reserva campesina* "has been around for a long time" (he did not say where it originated).

54. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994.

55. See Ronald Nigh, "Propuesta campesina: Conservación en los Chimalapas," *El Financiero*, 28 Oct. 1991, p. 84.

56. Interview with Gabriel Quadri, Director General de Normatividad, Instituto Nacional de Ecología, 29 Apr. 1994, Mexico City. Yet Quadri wrote earlier that in the Chimalapas case, "the environmentalists succeeded in mobilizing public opinion . . . , but they have been completely incapable of collaborating with state and national institutions." See Quadri (1993, 70).

57. Interview with Ezcurra, 7 July 1994.

58. Information supplied to the author in 1997 by SERBO, A.C. (Sociedad para el Estudio

cent denunciation may also have been politically motivated. Frequent realignment of local relationships is beyond the scope of this article, but it warrants further research.

Finally, within the environmental community, activists and NGOs by no means agreed on the issue at all times. As reported in one source and echoed by Miguel Angel García, Dr. Miguel Alvarez del Toro, a well-known ecologist and president of the Instituto de Historia Natural Chiapaneca, supported the original highway proposal on the basis of a study he had conducted concluding that the project would not harm El Ocote.⁵⁹ Ezcurra asserts that Alvarez del Toro did so because he considered the toll highway an excellent way to generate funds for ecological conservation of the area. In the end, the desvío issue caused schisms among various environmental NGOs. Further, the fact that Alvarez del Toro's organization is supported in part by the Chiapan government (which at the time supported the original highway route) led some to believe that his study was not done "completely freely," as one CNDCHIM member commented.

Among NGO actors, one also finds a fair amount of shifting blame or credit for certain episodes. For example, García argues that Pronatura was one of the groups originally planning to propose to Salinas a biosphere reserve for the Chimalapas. Seeming to take some of the credit for the desvío, the Director Ejecutivo of Pronatura avers that in Rio he tried to point out to Salinas "the incompatibility of his conservationist policy with his development policy."⁶⁰ *La lucha por Chimalapas*, which emerged from the bitter experience of the failed Vocalía, aptly highlights the subjectivity of its authors' perspective and the divergent points of view that it tried to incorporate: "although all of its data . . . can be corroborated, their selection and interpretation correspond to our present vision of the process" (Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al. 1993, 117–18). It is worth noting that the book was partly financed by Synergos Institute, a foundation in New York that partially funded the Vocalía and later CNDCHIM. Several interviewees emphasized that their accounts are personal evaluations, highlighting the dangers of telescopic memory, especially long after events have occurred. Only some problems of subjectivity

de los Recursos Bióticos de Oaxaca, an environmental organization in Oaxaca) suggests that 1996–1997 was a particularly difficult period for environmental groups working in the Chimalapas. The "polarization" has deepened between *congregaciones* supporting CNDCHIM and Maderas on one side and those supporting the government of Oaxaca on the other. Meanwhile, the tensions between ecologists and the governments of the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas have risen over the agrarian issue and megaprojects in the region.

59. Raúl Asdrúbal, "Una realidad la autopista Coita-Sayula," *La Extra* (Chiapas), 5 Aug. 1991, p. 1. Miguel Angel García noted that to his knowledge, Alvarez del Toro's institute was the only "environmentalist-type" organization that supported the original project. Interview with García, 27 May 1994.

60. Interviews with M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994, and Hans Hermann, Executive Director of Pronatura, 18 May 1994, Mexico City.

can be corrected by corroborating accounts with other spoken and written testimony or with documents.

The second qualifying point in the temporary redrawing of the highway route is that it is much too simple and inaccurate to give all the credit to CNDCHIM. The more likely explanation of why the government did what it did—and when—is that a number of factors coalesced at several crucial points, and CNDCHIM used its unique identity, position, and resources to exploit these moments.

Pertinent Factors

One of the most important elements in the rerouting of the highway was a certain political opportunity structure and CNDCHIM's ability to recognize and make use of it. Sidney Tarrow has defined *political opportunity structure* as generally including "the degree of openness or closure of the polity; the stability or instability of political alignments; the presence or absence of allies and support groups; and divisions within the elite . . ." (Tarrow 1989, 34). As mentioned, certain high-level functionaries were for various reasons more open than others to NGOs and their environmental concerns at the time. CNDCHIM showed political sophistication in recognizing these openings from above and utilizing its contacts with these figures. For example, Regina Barba, president of the Mexican environmental network Unión de Grupos Ambientalistas (UGAM) and member of CNDCHIM, has been criticized by several interviewees (including some members of CNDCHIM) for her close ties to the government. Yet in this case, her connections apparently helped CNDCHIM, especially when Barba approached government officials in Rio to discuss the Chimalapas issue.⁶¹

Regarding "openness or closure of the polity" to policy change or grassroots mobilization, the Mexican government was by no means suddenly liberalizing the policy process. But its environmental policy was under increasing international scrutiny in 1990–1993 because of the Earth Summit in Rio and negotiations on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although Mexican environmental groups were largely excluded by the government from both processes, they knew the government was vulnerable to international (particularly U.S.) attention to Mexico's environmental problems and controversial projects such as the proposed highway. CNDCHIM made use of the juncture in Rio, taking advantage of the importance that Salinas de Gortari placed on his country's image as "environment-friendly." The network's open letter of 23 May 1992 in *La Jornada* shows this approach clearly in the call for Salinas to be "an example of the vanguard" at the UNCED conference.

61. UGAM is also tied to CNDCHIM in that two key members of CNDCHIM, Bustamante and Robles Gil, were also founding members of UGAM.

Environmental lawyer Alberto Székely went so far as to say: "I think the [environmental] groups' persistence finally succeeded in getting the president to make a decision to avoid a greater political problem. Not because of the conviction of Mr. President, not because of any certainty that that was the lawful thing to do or the most appropriate thing from the environmental point of view but rather exclusively for political reasons, because of public opinion and above all in light of the government's obsession with maintaining an acceptable international image. . . ."62 Compounding the government's external vulnerability has been the PRI's internal organizational and identity crisis in recent years and (particularly in the 1990s) its legitimacy crisis following the 1988 elections, whose results were seriously marred by fraud. This factor may have made the Salinas administration even more sensitive to national controversies like the Chimalapas issue.

The role of "political alignments" and elite divisions is often difficult to determine in Mexico, as much of what goes on within the PRI at higher levels transpires behind tightly closed doors. Yet there seems to have been a notable difference in the early 1990s between the Oaxacan state government's handling of the Chimalapas problem and that of the Chiapan state government. This difference probably indicated a split in the elite ranks that created further space for popular mobilization around the issue.⁶³ In a 1994 interview, García pointed out that the SEDESOL delegation in Oaxaca had been particularly helpful in the deslinde process, at least up to that time.⁶⁴ In contrast, most written and oral accounts emphasize the Chiapan government's exacerbation or even fomenting of the land dispute. At the meeting on 16 December 1993 to discuss the deslinde problem, the Oaxacan and Chiapan governors disagreed openly.⁶⁵ And in early 1994, González Garrido, who had left the governorship of Chiapas to head the Secretaría de Gobernación only the year before, was forced to resign from his cabinet post. Although this development was not because of the Chimalapas problem, it could be taken as a further indication of splits among the various political elites involved in the issue.

The role of international actors or "allies and support groups" has also been an important factor in the Chimalapas case. From early on, international organizations have funded Mexican environmental and development NGOs working in the Chimalapas. The MacArthur Foundation and Synergos Institute funded the Vocalía before its demise (*Espacios Culturales de Innovación Tecnológica et al.* 1993, 63, n. 14). Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste has received financial assistance from the WWF, the

62. Interview with Alberto Székely, environmental lawyer, 26 May 1994, Mexico City.

63. As mentioned in note 58, it appears as of mid-1997 that this difference has narrowed substantially.

64. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994.

65. Rojas, "Resultó tensa," *La Jornada*, p. 23.

Overseas Development Administration (ODA), and the Rockefeller Foundation for its work in the area.⁶⁶ Synergos has also served as a support organization to local NGOs and communities in the Chimalapas for several years, providing technical assistance and contacts with Mexican government officials. Maderas's pragmatism vis-à-vis its international allies is evident in the organization's capacity to use the WWF as a way to gain political leverage for Maderas.

Finally, CNDCHIM's deployment of its own resources and identity was decisive. CNDCHIM has played up the prestige and name recognition of its members, who include well-known NGOs, artists, and scientists. CNDCHIM has also emphasized its solidarity with local communities and its collective identity as an "interdisciplinary support group" to help them achieve their goals, mitigating the common criticism of Mexican environmental organizations as middle-class, urban, and disconnected from rural counterparts. Thus it may be somewhat harder for the government and others to discount CNDCHIM as another "bourgeois organization" with its own agenda. In short, while elements of timing, international events, public image, government connections, and political opportunity structure were all important in the flow of events leading to the government's change in policy, CNDCHIM's ability to capitalize on all of these was fundamental to the outcome.

When viewed amidst the set of conditions laid out at the beginning of this research note, CNDCHIM stands out among Mexican environmental networks. As outlined, its goals were clearly defined and it has maintained a certain level of cohesion between Mexico City and rural components. In addition, the Comité Nacional originally coalesced around well-defined and politically sensitive issues: the proposed highway through El Ocote and the official boundaries of chima communal land. CNDCHIM draws on a wide range of participants whose potential differences may be mitigated by the fact that the network chose a few central and specific goals early on. Although disagreements have occurred within its ranks, they have not been serious enough to split the network, as happened to a number of other well-known environmental networks in Mexico in recent years.⁶⁷ Finally, network members have made strategic and effective use of the network's identity, specialized resources, and the political opportunities that have arisen at national and international levels to further its causes.

CNDCHIM thus has made important strides in policy impact and the creation of political space. It played a role in affecting certain policy

66. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994, and telephone conversation with García, 27 June 1995.

67. Two networks that eventually ruptured are the Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and the Foro Mexicano de la Sociedad Civil para Río 92 (Foromex), which tried to represent Mexican environmental and development NGOs at UNCED. One cause was the existence of personal and political differences among members (see Umlas 1996, chaps. 3 and 4).

outcomes: the *desvío*, the commencement of the formal *deslinde* process, and the (perhaps symbolic) declaration by the federal government in April 1994 that San Isidro la Gringa is communal property. Admittedly, CNDCHIM has been less successful at forcing both local ranchers and Chiapan authorities into settling the *deslinde* conflict. At the same time, the network has created a forum for discussing the Chimalapas. It has also helped enlarge the space at the national level (and within the government) for communal leaders to discuss regional problems and for CNDCHIM members to present their proposals for alternative development and resource management in the area.

CNDCHIM is thus unusual in both its impact and its ability to bring together middle-class environmental activists and grassroots indigenous groups in a relatively sustained way. But it is also an important example of the growing number of formally constituted networks that can function simultaneously for members as structure, space, and agent. As a relatively new yet persistent form of organization across the NGO sector in Mexico (not just among environmental organizations),⁶⁸ this type of network needs further study and theoretical development. It is different enough from the “submerged networks” described by Melucci and other theorists to warrant its own analysis. CNDCHIM in particular and formally constituted networks in general could be viewed in the light of recent calls regarding the need to bridge within social-movement analysis the symbolic and the strategic, the role of abstract notions of collective identity, and more practical questions of resource mobilization.⁶⁹

Conclusions

In an interview in July 1994, a high-ranking environmental official mentioned that he was not sure if the highway that had caused so much controversy would ever be built. Given the economic crisis of the early 1990s (and the one that began in late 1994) as well as the enormous cost of the new route, the tolls charged would have to be steep for the planned Ocozocautla-Cosoleacaque highway to pay for itself (the premise on which Salinas based his ambitious toll highway project, according to the official). For these reasons, the official concluded that “the interest in building [the highway] has disappeared.” It is indeed unclear whether the highway will be completed.⁷⁰ Ironically, this outcome would to some de-

68. See Chalmers et al. (1995), which analyzes NGO networks working on women’s issues, electoral rights, free trade, and social policy.

69. Thus Escobar and Alvarez call for a “cross-pollination” of concepts of resource mobilization and new social movements in Escobar and Alvarez (1992). Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller’s edited work (1992) makes similar bridging efforts for a wide range of social movements and organizations.

70. Interviews with Ezcurra, 7 July 1994, and M. A. García, 27 May 1994; and telephone

gree fulfill CNDCHIM's ambitious original call to suspend the highway, although it has resulted from factors partly beyond CNDCHIM's control.

It may be that the perception of success in achieving one's goals is just as important as success itself. Certainly, many of CNDCHIM's participants feel that the network has won important victories, the main one being the detour of the original highway project. García listed other "successes" made possible by what he calls CNDCHIM's "enormous social force": the working out of the *planos definitivos* of the Chimalapas to settle the boundary dispute; the pressure CNDCHIM has created "for the comprehensive solution of the agrarian conflict, not just on paper"; and CNDCHIM's having given force to the proposal for the Reserva Ecológica Campesina.⁷¹ CNDCHIM and the *chimas* are still embroiled in the territorial dispute with the government and local landowners, and the Reserva Campesina remains far from a reality. But García is correct in pointing to the less tangible but significant gains made by the network in creating pressure, laying the foundation for an eventual solution, and constantly demanding that the government address the immediate issues and consider a fundamental, long-term change in resource management.

The perception of this "success" has helped the group to maintain members' enthusiasm. Ezcurra does not agree with the network's assessment of its "victory," but he captures the importance of this perception in his statement that CNDCHIM's account is "even part of a strategy for them, because it is very unifying—their triumph in the face of any external proposal with which they do not agree."⁷² Thus CNDCHIM's symbolic gains have also aided its survival and progress. A well-known Mexican environmental lawyer observed that the redrawing of the highway dispelled a general feeling of resignation and strengthened the sense of potential for civil-society organizations to achieve solid gains. This sense, he pointed out, is an "important ingredient" of democratization.⁷³ His observation underscores Alvarez and Escobar's call for analysis of social movements in Latin America to "pay closer attention to the democratizing impact of the symbolic challenge to dominant discourses on politics and development posed by some contemporary movements" (Alvarez and Escobar 1992, 327).

conversation with García, 27 June 1995. García stated in 1995 that the highway (the alternate route) was being built. But the route, which now includes a portion over the Malpaso Dam, has proved to be a costly undertaking in requiring the construction of two bridges.

71. Interview with M. A. García, 18 Feb. 1994. Víctor Manuel Toledo has pointed out that many reserve areas in Mexico are "surrounded by peasant movements demanding effective participation in the management of these areas of biological conservation." See Toledo (1992, 77).

72. Interview with Ezcurra, 7 July 1994. He is referring here to CNDCHIM's argument that they defeated the government's plans for creating a biosphere reserve in the Chimalapas.

73. Interview with Raúl Brañes, 25 Apr. 1994.

To the extent that movements and organizations in Mexico legitimate or at least popularize the national-level discussion of alternative resource management and development schemes, they represent such a symbolic challenge. Only a few years ago, these schemes were given little or no hearing by a government fully committed to free-market economics,⁷⁴ but now they are at least being discussed in official circles. In reality, various individuals and organizations in Mexico have long pressed for a debate on alternatives to neoliberalism. In particular, they have criticized the Salinas de Gortari administration for rapidly opening the country to free trade, a move that has devastated the forestry sector, small farmers, and others. But it took the severe recent economic crisis that began in late 1994 and the subsequent widespread repudiation of Salinas's headlong rush into economic liberalization (even by some PRIistas) to enlarge the space for a national discussion of economic models.

Just what CNDCHIM's contribution to democratization in Mexico has been is difficult to tell. Such developments are generally gradual and their measurement somewhat arbitrary. In general, many critics of environmental organizations in Mexico and even some participants feel that these groups have not done enough to push the country toward a more open political system. Several reasons can be cited: their ambivalence toward the government and political involvement; the fact that some environmental groups (especially the relatively wealthy conservationist organizations) have extensive ties to the business community or to government officials and consequently are reluctant to criticize policy; and the fact that many environmental NGOs lack connections to more vocal urban popular and rural organizations.

It is evident that members of CNDCHIM view the network as working toward democratization in a broad sense, including the right to choose one's own representatives, the right to information, and the right to participate in decision making. García and Bustamante both referred to the Reserva Campesina when asked about CNDCHIM's role in democratization. García responded, "normally we speak of democracy just in the electoral field, and that is not even the most important field. The electoral field is one of the bases of democracy—but democracy in the election of all kinds of representatives, starting with ejido, communal, [and] union [representatives]. So . . . the Reserva Campesina is a demonstration of absolute democracy in the management of natural resources."⁷⁵ Bustamante stated, "I think we have here a classic model of democracy in which civil society and indigenous communities decide on and take an interest in de-

74. This situation meant, under the Salinas de Gortari administration, rapid privatization in general and legalization of the sale of ejido land in particular. The trend toward economic liberalization in Mexico began under Salinas's predecessor, President Miguel de la Madrid.

75. Interview with M. A. García, 27 May 1994.

fending their patrimony, which belongs to everyone—natural resources. And they are organizing themselves to do it So . . . if support is given to the decision of the communities and civil society to create this reserve the way society and the communities want to create it, that is democracy.”⁷⁶

Commenting more broadly on environmental NGOs in general, Székely observed that they have contributed to the democratization process “in the sense of snatching a little of the government’s decision-making monopoly, of taking away the discretion and arbitrariness with which [the government] is able to administer the law, of obliging the government to listen to the views coming from society.”⁷⁷ One could credit CNDCHIM in particular for such accomplishments: for its role in forcing the government to reconsider and eventually change its policy, for having opened the Chimalapas issue to national debate, and for having pressured the government to take the needs of a marginalized population into account.

But even if this view is accepted, the outcome remains troubling. That is, if Székely is correct in his statement that Salinas changed the highway route for political and image reasons rather than ecological ones, this approach is not a long-term solution to Mexico’s underlying problem of lack of environmental planning. While it is encouraging that mobilization within civil society can bring formerly secretive issues to the table and can force government accountability on the environment, the flip side is that the government may respond only to the most (potentially) scandalous problems and only in a fragmentary or superficial fashion, without addressing more integral questions of environment and development. As Environmental Attorney General Oñate stated in July 1992, the revised highway “does not save the Chimalapas unless there is an overall plan for the area.” The Reserva Campesina is part of this plan,⁷⁸ but it is hostage to the resolution of the agrarian conflict in the area. Two researchers have noted the creation in parts of the isthmus of “colonies of smallholders . . . where peasants are financed by capitalist cattlers [to] clear and convert their own land parcels to pasture, which are abandoned as unproductive after being overgrazed by the cacique’s cattle” (Anaya and Alvarez 1994, 49). Other researchers have written recently of a new *brecha* (for a highway) being opened in the forest, planned to run from Cal y Major to San Isidro La Gringa (Avila and García 1997, 91, n. 47).

Problems also exist with regard to the practical implications of CNDCHIM’s impact on environmental mobilization and (by extension) environmental organizations’ impact on democratization. Bray has noted the lack of “cohesive national organizations of forest communities” in Mexico (partly because of lack of government support) and “no peasant

76. Interview with Bustamante, 16 May 1994.

77. Interview with Székely, 26 May 1994.

78. Oñate as cited in David Luhnnow, “Proposed Highway Course May Save Forest Treasure,” *The News*, 8 July 1992, p. 7 (published in Mexico City).

equivalent to the panoply of urban middle-class environmental groups" formed in recent years (Bray 1995, 192–93, 200 n. 19). Another problem is the general failure of these middle-class environmental organizations to form lasting ties and give voice to organizations and movements outside their narrow sphere (including urban popular and peasant groups) and to maintain their own networks at the national level (Umlas 1996, esp. chaps. 3 and 4). This situation makes CNDCHIM an intriguing example of an environmental network that seems to have joined middle-class urban activists with grassroots indigenous and community-based groups in a relatively sustained way and had a recognizable impact on political space and policy. The network itself faces challenges that are both internal and external. For example, despite the presence of urban middle-class and grassroots indigenous activists in CNDCHIM's ranks, some of "the elites" remain separated from the grassroots, many providing only "moral support" or name recognition to the network. Further, CNDCHIM's inability to resolve the deslinde issue once and for all may strengthen the hand of its opponents—powerful ranchers and Chiapan political elites.

It is apparent from this case that a vertical or centralized structure is not a prerequisite for a network's durability or its capacity to achieve stated goals. Rather, what is important to a formally constituted network seems to be clear goals, some cohesion, and leadership by a few well-connected, dedicated, and experienced members who include local leaders. They need political openings and resources (which can be money, prestige, and access to the media, as well as international and governmental allies). But most of all, they need the ability in acting as structures, spaces, and agents to recognize and exploit these resources and opportunities. The potential for other formally constituted networks like CNDCHIM to join sectors of civil society in a manner that broadens the activism of formerly circumscribed groups and brings to the fore voices previously unheard outside local circles is sufficient reason to study this relatively new type of organization more carefully. As vertical political structures in Mexico weaken, it is crucial to identify and analyze these alternative ways of "doing politics."

In the end, the indigenous communities of the Chimalapas have demanded far more than the cancellation of a planned highway that would damage their forests or the creation of their own ecological reserve to manage this land. In a letter published in 1994 in *La Jornada* and signed by the Comunidad de Santa María Chimalapa, the Comunidad de San Miguel Chimalapa, and CNDCHIM, these communities spoke eloquently about the stalled deslinde process: "We indigenous peoples have a tradition of holding a dialogue and seeking peaceful consensus to solve problems, but when that dialogue and that consensus are mocked . . . , we Chimalapas have mobilized with all of our villages to seek out the justice denied. . . ."

Mr. President, we again declare to you that we native Chimalapas want peace and dialogue, but above all we want justice. . . ."⁷⁹

The mobilization of CNDCHIM is merely one recent event in the long history of the indigenous communities of the Chimalapas, and it addresses only part of their call for justice. But CNDCHIM has become an integral part of their story in helping empower these communities to make such demands public and to take steps at the national level toward realizing their own goals, in which ecology is bound up with political, cultural, social, and economic needs.

79. "Grandes riesgos en la selva de Chimalapas," *La Jornada*, 30 Jan. 1994, p. 40.

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