

Despite Obstacles and Setbacks, A Sense of Forward Momentum

The Environmental Movement in Mexico and Cross-Border Organizing Today: Where Do Things Stand?

by Annika S. Hipple

In March 2000, Mexico's nascent environmental movement won one of its biggest battles to date when President Ernesto Zedillo permanently vetoed the proposed construction of a salt production plant at Laguna San Ignacio in Baja California. The campaign to stop the salt facility lasted five years and involved more than fifty Mexican environmental groups. U.S. organizations, like the U.S.-based Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), also played important roles in the effort; thus, in addition to winning important protection for the gray whale, the San Ignacio decision also represents a victory for cross-border environmental organizing.

The success at San Ignacio reflects two trends. One is that Mexican environmental groups are becoming increasingly vocal and visible actors in the national policymaking arena. The second is that, in the post-NAFTA era, activists on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border are keenly aware that by organizing across the international dividing line, they can greatly enhance the scope and impact of their work.

Some analysts have questioned whether the various environmental groups in Mexico can truly be called an environmental movement. In his book *Endangered Mexico*, Joel Simon notes that "there is no mass membership organization or political movement associated with environmentalism in Mexico; by and large it remains an elite issue." Indeed, few Mexican environmental groups have a national platform of issues, and many do not share political ideas and strategies. And with the exception of NAFTA and the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, initiatives to develop networks have been slow to evolve into strong linkages. As Miriam Alfie, a sociologist at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, explains it, "there is no common project."

But although Mexico's environmental community is sometimes fragmented and continues to face serious obstacles—such as lack of access to environmental information as well as funding—today, green groups south of the border are building their capacity, nurturing alliances, and focusing their energies in new, more effective ways. An environmental movement has indeed emerged, and despite the challenges that lie ahead, the outlook for its continuing development looks good.

Environmental Mobilization in Mexico

Environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) first emerged as important actors in Mexico during the 1980s. Early groups mobilized primarily around specific concerns, such as worsening air pollution in Mexico City. One major rallying point during the 1980s was the construction of Mexico's first nuclear power plant at Laguna Verde in Veracruz state. Although the attempts to stop the plant were unsuccessful, the campaign "detonated the environmental movement in this country" says Federico Gaxiola, environmental program leader at Radio UNAM in Mexico City. According to Miriam Alfie, "Laguna Verde was the door that opened up the active participation of civil society in ecological issues."

The debates surrounding the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) further galvanized environmental groups in Mexico. NAFTA also presented a political opportunity for Mexican groups at home. In order to satisfy U.S. and Canadian concerns tied to the potential negative

impacts of increased trade, then-President Carlos Salinas faced the political necessity of having to prove that Mexico was indeed serious about safeguarding the environment. This reality, says Betty Ferber of the Grupo de los Cien, a Mexico City-based environmental group comprised of prominent writers, artists, and intellectuals, "was very useful for us in [terms of getting [legislation] passed in the years leading up to the passage of NAFTA."

The NAFTA debate also led to the creation of new national networks and international alliances, as environmental and labor groups cooperated across the border in order to attract media coverage to NAFTA's shortcomings and to lobby in favor of socially conscious side-agreements in the U.S. Congress. In the end, the efforts of environmental groups in Mexico, the U.S., and Canada forced the three governments to attach an environmental side-agreement to NAFTA, setting the stage for much of the cross-border environmental organizing that is occurring today. Mark Spalding, an environmental lawyer and faculty member at the University of California-San Diego's School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, notes that "prior to our work with Mexican counterparts during the NAFTA negotiations, there was little such organizing. Now it is becoming commonplace for appropriate issues."

Despite these important achievements, however, environmental groups in Mexico have continued to face numerous challenges, including cooptation and other forms of government control. During the Salinas administration, for example, some groups complained that they were being willfully excluded from government forums and consultations while other organizations were granted access, and this aggravated divisions within Mexico's environmental community.

This fragmentation continued during the *sexenio* of Ernesto Zedillo, as some environmentalists opted to join or cooperate with new federal agencies, while others did not. For example, Raquel Gutiérrez Nájera, notes that Mexico's Consejos Consultivos para el Desarrollo Sustentable (National Advisory Councils for Sustainable Development) "certainly appear to be dominated by representatives of organizations with 'rosy' attitudes toward the politics of the system." According to Gutiérrez Nájera, this has contributed to "the demobilization" of environmental groups.

Homero Aridjis, president of the Grupo de los Cien, adds that "to be a civil society activist in this country is very difficult without being bribed or coopted." Zedillo's policy has been "I close my ears, I don't answer to these people." "The government denies the authority and credibility of civil society," Aridjis complains. Miriam Alfie agrees. "All this talk of opening, citizen participation, and democratization-it's just slogans. Who really gets to participate?" she asks.

In addition to these subtler forms, government constraint of environmentalists in Mexico occurs in more flagrant ways as well. In one case that has drawn the attention of human rights activists, Rodolfo Montiel, the leader of a peasant group opposing logging in Guerrero state, has been held in jail for over a year on trumped-up charges.

Besides direct government suppression, many other barriers hinder the efforts of environmentalists in Mexico. "The [environmental] movement is shackled by a lack of access to environmental information, such as toxics inventories, and the lack of a regulatory framework with mandates for public participation in decisionmaking," says Talli Nauman, a journalist who has covered the environment in Mexico for many years. She adds that "government policy prioritizing globalization of the economy undermines grassroots efforts to promote sustainable development alternatives."

But for all the obstacles, including a chronic lack of funding for nonprofit groups, Mexico's environmental community today is stronger, smarter, and more organized than ever before. The big question now is how the political transition in Mexico will affect environmentalists and their work. Will the administration of Vicente Fox offer new opportunities or new constraints-or both? According to Talli Nauman, "some analysts fear that since Fox is a businessman, he will run the country like a company, and since the private sector record on environmental quality is not good, this will entail more risks for the environment as well as setbacks for the movement. On the other hand, some say

that the president-elect has a knack for listening, and since he doesn't have personal expertise on environmental issues, he may be responsive to the movement's demands."

Another concern is that the tradition of cooptation in Mexico has led some environmental groups to oppose government policy indiscriminately, without formulating and forwarding a coherent alternative agenda. This will have to change in coming years, argue activists south of the border. "We have to move beyond *la denuncia*," says Laura Durazo, a leading Mexican environmentalist based in Tijuana. "Groups need to be very responsible; they need a strong reason, a clear argument for opposing something," agrees Gustavo Alanís, president of the Mexican Environmental Law Center (CEMDA).

To maintain its momentum, Raquel Gutiérrez Nájera says, "the environmental movement must recover its cohesion, since it seems that the [Fox] team does not have much sympathy for environmental issues. The environmental movement, it seems to me, must overcome this period of ebb through institutionalized spaces, and go beyond them."

Cross-Border Environmental Organizing

An increasingly common strategy for expanding the spaces and resources available to environmental groups is cross-border organizing. Though cross-border work began during the NAFTA debates, the focus of those efforts has shifted. According to Dick Kamp of the Bisbee, Arizona-based Border Ecology Project, "[activity has] died down on attempts to develop cross-border policies, while the focus on assisting groups on priority policy issues in Mexico has increased." Specific issues that are receiving this kind of attention today, Kamp says, include right-to-know legislation, hazardous waste management, forestry practices, and the mining industry.

Another area in which cross-border solidarity can weigh in to good effect is in public awareness efforts tied to specific campaigns and cases. One recent campaign was the fight to stop construction of a nuclear waste storage facility at Sierra Blanca in western Texas, just 32 kilometers from the Mexican border. To challenge the site, activists established an international coalition, with groups on both sides of the border sponsoring a wide range of protest actions. South of the border, they lobbied with Mexican local and state governments, which adopted resolutions against the proposed siting, as did, eventually, Mexico's Congress. Influenced by binational pressure, Texas environmental authorities finally rejected the Sierra Blanca proposal on October 22, 1998. According to Richard Boren, one of the key organizers of the Sierra Blanca campaign, "the binational campaign was absolutely essential to the success we had in stopping the dump. It exponentially increased our effectiveness in fighting the state of Texas." Though it is too early to assess the long-term impacts of the victory, Boren argues that Sierra Blanca has strengthened other grassroots efforts to stop toxic waste dumps and polluting facilities.

In a second recent example, the Laguna San Ignacio case, the international campaign against the proposed salt facility (jointly owned by the Mexican government and the Mitsubishi Corporation under the name Exportadora de Sal, S.A., or ESSA) demonstrated just how effective cross-border campaigns can be in raising the profile of particular cases. The effort involved advertisements in major newspapers, legal suits, a consumer boycott of Mitsubishi, and massive letter writing campaigns. After President Zedillo eventually cancelled the project, Mitsubishi director James Brumm acknowledged that international pressure from environmentalists and the public had been a factor in the decision. The company received 700,000 postcards from around the world asking them not to harm the gray whale. Zedillo also received some 15,000 letters urging him to protect the whales.

Beyond stopping the salt plant, the San Ignacio campaign, according to Mark Spalding, has led to a "greater deepening of relationships and trust [and the] transfer of strategies and planning concepts [in both directions]." He adds that "for us in the U.S., [we now have] a better idea of who we can [and cannot] successfully work with in Mexico. Presumably they feel the same about us."

Another sign of enhanced cross-border organizing is the increase in recent years of conferences and workshops held to stimulate binational and trinational cooperation on environmental issues. Perhaps the largest and most diverse such conference is the Annual Meeting on the Border Environment (Encuentro), organized by the University of Arizona's Latin American Area Center and Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental in Tijuana. The first two meetings, held in Ciudad Juárez in 1998 and Tijuana in 1999, each attracted approximately 400 participants from diverse walks of life on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The third meeting is slated to take place in Tijuana in the spring of 2001. Among other goals, say conference organizers, the Encuentro seeks to foster cross-border alliance building. The event also seeks to provide capacity building training sessions to NGOs and activists, and much of its budget provides travel and lodging funds and fee waivers for Mexican groups and participants that otherwise might not be able to attend.

This sort of financial assistance is consistent with a larger trend focused on increasing the resources available to Mexican groups, both in terms of funding as well as capacity building and training opportunities. "Among those of us who have been at this since the 1980s," says Dick Kamp, "there is focused, serious cooperation on trying to strengthen our counterparts in Mexico long-term" by identifying and channeling sources of funding.

But money is not the whole story. To develop a successful collaboration, Kamp says, it is necessary to "spend a whole lot of time looking at what motivates groups and individuals that you intend to work with. Then," he says, "you select the areas that you are likely to succeed in through common interest and be damned sure that, if you are organizing from the U.S. side, you are looking at it from the Mexican perspective first." In the end, says Richard Boren, cross-border organizing "really boils down to: do you want to do it or not? If you want to do cross-border [work], then you seek out groups in Mexico or the U.S. and open up those contacts." More and more groups appear to be doing just that.

Annika S. Hipple received an MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Arizona in May 2000. Her thesis examined the relationship between environmental groups and the media in Mexico.

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