

Mexico's Indigenous Population Declining Due to Increased Emigration Rates

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Emigration and other poverty-related factors have caused Mexico's indigenous population to decline since 2000. In a report published in February, the government's population commission (Comision Nacional de Poblacion, CONAPO) said the number of indigenous Mexicans declined by 336,000 between 2000 and 2005. CONAPO last year reported Mexico's indigenous population at 13.2 million. In that report, released in August 2006, the agency had projected a growth in the indigenous population to 14.2 million by 2010.

A drop in overall birth rates in indigenous communities was part of the reason for the decline in population. "The number of children under age 5 is on the decline, which could be explained by a drop in birth rates resulting from the expansion of sexual education in indigenous communities," said CONAPO. The agency noted that indigenous women still have an average of 2.6 children, compared with 2.1 for the general population. Still, the rate for indigenous women was expected to decline to 2.3 children by the end of the decade.

Infant mortality remains high in indigenous communities, with 291 deaths reported for every 10,000 births. This compares with a ratio of 181 deaths per 10,000 births in the general population, said CONAPO. Still, emigration remained the single most important factor behind the reduced indigenous population, as evidenced by the decline in the population of 20- to 24-year-olds. "The members of many families are no longer creating new indigenous households or are simply no longer present in the country," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

Emigration tied to downturn in agriculture

Most states have lost a share of their indigenous population to emigration, with the trend evident even in the communities that had been loyal to the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). For years, many residents of these communities opted to remain close to their home base, partly to build the vision of autonomous communities promoted by the Zapatistas (see SourceMex, 2004-02-08). Chiapas is among the states with the largest indigenous population in Mexico. Others are Yucatan, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Guerrero, Michoacan, and Mexico state.

Many residents of Zapatista communities have had no choice but to emigrate because of an economic crisis throughout the state, tied in part to a sluggish agriculture economy. "The economic crisis in Chiapas has forced indigenous peoples to look for new alternatives," said the Agencia de noticias Proceso. "Even the Zapatista residents have abandoned their arms and their autonomous communities to go in search of the 'American dream.'"

Zapatista communities traditionally do not receive benefits through the Oportunidades program or other government supports, which makes their situation worse. "Hunger hits hard [in these

communities]," said San Cristobal de las Casas Bishop Felipe Arizmendi at an immigration summit sponsored by the bishops of the three Roman Catholic dioceses in Chiapas. The summit primarily looked at the treatment of Central American immigrants traveling through the state en route to the US. "We are seeing a different face to immigration in our communities," said Arizmendi. "It is no longer just Central Americans but thousands of Chiapanecos who are abandoning their homes, their lands, and their families to emigrate to other states in Mexico, but mostly to the US."

Critics said the crisis in indigenous communities could be linked to the neoliberal policies promoted by former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and enacted by his successors through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "That market-opening policy caused Mexico to go from the most protected to the most liberalized country in the world," columnist Ruben Mujica Velez of the Oaxaca-based daily newspaper Noticias: Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca said in early February in response to the concerns about Mexico's agriculture crisis.

Many critics blame the recent surge in the price of tortillas on the decision to allow increased imports of corn from the US, which hurt Mexico's ability to control its own domestic supply and ultimately led to the high prices (see SourceMex, 2007-01-10, 2007-01-31 and 2007-04-18). "In other countries like Japan, for example, politicians opted to protect a few thousand rice producers who could not compete in the world market by giving them subsidies and buying their products at noncompetitive prices," said Mujica. "This helped keep many from become unemployed and unproductive."

Arizmendi said the tortilla crisis has caused special concern in indigenous communities. "People are really worried," said the Catholic bishop. "I hope that this does not lead to an armed insurrection." He noted that a decline in the global price of coffee, a leading crop in Chiapas, was one factor that contributed to the Zapatista uprising in 1994 (see SourceMex, 1994-01-12).

Loss of indigenous languages also a concern

Another growing concern in indigenous communities along with the decline in population is the possible loss of native languages. Most members of indigenous communities who migrate to other cities in Mexico or to the US are forced to use Spanish to communicate. In most instances, this comes at the expense of their native language. "There are communities, like the Mixtec, who are notable for preserving their language wherever they go," said Fernando Navas, director of the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indigenas (INALI). "But that's an exception; normally they adopt the language of the place and lose their own."

Navas said the chances of survival are strong for some languages like Nahuatl and Maya because they are used extensively, but many others are at great risk of disappearing. Some efforts are underway to preserve native languages. In late February, members of the organization Escritores en Lenguas Indigenas, Asociacion Civil (ELIAC) launched a campaign to urge the government to do more to implement a law that protects the native tongues spoken by about 10% of Mexico's population.

ELIAC, which comprises 50 writers, asked President Felipe Calderon's administration to design a multilingual policy "that transcends education," rather than continuing to place a high emphasis on

the Spanish language. The group says that only 63 of the 140 languages known to have been spoken in Mexico prior to the Spanish conquest remain in existence.

Of the languages that survived, close to 90% are in danger of extinction and some already are spoken only by a small number of families. "Our languages should coexist with Spanish or English in the social, cultural, and educational spaces so that all Mexican children including mestizos [those of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry] can adopt their regional tongue," said ELIAC's Juan Gregorio Regino, who writes in the Mazatec tongue.

The effort to preserve native languages could also help stem the dropout rate in Mexico. In Mexico City, about 4,500 children between ages 6 and 12 drop out of school each year because they cannot speak Spanish. These children belong to ethnic groups such as the Otomi, Mazahua, Triqui, Zapotecs, and Mixtecs, said Sen. Jorge Legorreta Ordorica, a member of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

The effort to respect native languages extends beyond education. After a five-year struggle, advocates in Yucatan succeeded in convincing the state legislature to approve a law guaranteeing the cultural and legal rights of Mayan residents. The law guarantees bilingual legal representation and preservation of languages and traditions. "It took five years to get this law approved, even though the indigenous community represents about half of Yucatan's 900,000 inhabitants," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

At the federal level, the Senate approved an initiative in mid-March that protects the legal rights of all indigenous defendants. Under the legislation, the prosecuting agencies will be required to ensure bilingual representation for any member of an indigenous community who is detained. The Senate move was in part a response to a recent UN study, which criticized Mexico for violating the basic human rights of indigenous individuals. "They do not have access to an equitable system of justice; they are the object of torture, abuse, and are denied translators," said the UN report.

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