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Isolated from the outside world because of a lack of telephone infrastructure, residents of the remote community of Villa Talea de Castro in Oaxaca state began efforts in 2008 to convince the major telecommunications companies to bring cellular telephone service to the village. The residents were rebuffed repeatedly, as the cellular companies, including industry giant América Móvil, declined because the venture would be unprofitable. Officials from Telcel, a subsidiary of América Móvil, told residents that the company did not conduct business with communities whose population was less than 5,000. The population of Villa Talea de Castro, a predominantly Zapotec community, is half that size. América Móvil is affiliated with the telephone giant TELMEX, owned by billionaire Carlos Slim.

Another company presented even more stringent demands. The village would have to guarantee 10,000 users and construct a road so the company could install an antenna on the mountaintop, said village secretary Alejandro López Canseco.

After repeated rejection from Telcel and other companies, residents of Villa Talea de Castro decided to explore other alternatives to install a means of communication, which was particularly important for residents with relatives who had emigrated to other cities in Mexico and the US.

Following discussions with indigenous organizations, civic groups, and universities, Villa Talea de Castro, 15 km from Oaxaca City in the Sierra Norte, agreed to participate in a project sponsored by several universities, civic organizations, and the Congreso Nacional de Comunicación Indígena, which is committed to promoting the right of indigenous communities to acquire, administer, and operate their own means of communications.

As part of the project promoted by the civic organization Redes por la Diversidad, Equidad y Sustentabilidad (REDES), residents proceeded to create a microprovider called Red Celular de Talea (RCT) by simply setting up an antenna on the rooftop of a building in the village and installing radio and computer equipment. The system, which uses a private bandwidth that does not require permits or concessions, communicates with the outside world through a computer connection offering Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP).

"The initiative sought to identify the technical, economic, and legal conditions so the indigenous communities that lack cellular telephone service are able to obtain this mode of communication," said a statement from REDES.

Project could serve as model for other communities

REDES said the criteria for the project is based on recommendations from the Connect a School, Connect a Community initiative, a public-private partnership launched by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN agency that promotes information and communications technology.
"We structured a scheme for service based on collaboration, economies of scale, and traditional indigenous systems of organization," said REDES.

For Villa de Talea users, the system is cheaper than any service they might have received from the commercial telecommunications companies. "At a cost of only 15 pesos [US$1.12] per month, I can make all the necessary personal and business calls," local restaurant owner Ramiro Pérez said in an interview with Agence France-Presse. Residents are only allowed five minutes per call to avoid oversaturation of the eleven lines. There is an additional charge of 80 centavos (US$0.06) per minute for overseas calls.

Villa de Talea leaders say the project serves as a model for other communities in Oaxaca and other Mexican states that lack cellular service.

"The neighboring communities are interested in the project so the antennas can be linked in an autonomous community network," village secretary López Canseco said in a telephone interview with the Spanish news agency EFE.

Still, López acknowledged that the project has involved a learning curve, forcing organizers to make adjustments. "Three months after we started operations, we had more than 600 users, and the equipment that we had could accommodate only eleven lines," said the Villa de Talea official. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 28, 2013, reported at 13.30 pesos per US$1.00.]

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