The political value of land, remittances and a possible case of land grabbing

The case of an Indigenous village in Oaxaca, Mexico

Iván Sandoval Cervantes

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by Iván Sandoval Cervantes

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www.iss.nl/ldpi
landpolitics@gmail.com

in collaboration with:
Institute for Development Studies (IDS)
University of Sussex
Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 1273 606261 *Fax: +44 1273 621202* *E-mail: ids@ids.ac.uk* *Website: www.ids.ac.uk*

Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS)
International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 70 426 0664 *Fax: +31 70 426 0799* *E-mail: iss.icas@gmail.com* *Website: www.iss.nl/icas*

The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS)
School of Government, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17
Bellville 7535, Cape Town
South Africa
Tel: +27 21 959 3733 *Fax: +27 21 959 3732* *E-mail: info@plaas.org.za* *Website: www.plaas.org.za*

The Polson Institute for Global Development
Department of Development Sociology
Cornell University
133 Warren Hall
Ithaca NY 14853
United States of America
Tel: +1 607 255-3163 *Fax: +1 607 254-2896* *E-mail: ta12@cornell.edu* *Website: polson.cals.cornell.edu*

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This paper is based on my Master's dissertation (Sandoval-Cervantes 2012), and many of the events and narratives that I analyze here can be found there.

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which transantional capital is reshaping land politics in the Zapotec Indigenous community of Zegache, Oaxaca. Oaxaca is a predominantly rural state in southern Mexico, characterized by land conflicts and a high rate of migration. Zegache, in the Zimatlán Valley, is not a stranger to these phenomena; its economy depends on remittances and nonindustrialized agriculture, and land is still a central element in local political conflicts. Zegache's inhabitants are divided between *comuneros* (those who defend communal land) and *propietarios* (who are in favor of private property), and this division informs the political struggles not only in Oaxaca but also in the immigrant community of Zegacheños living in Oregon, U.S. Here, I will explore how transnational capital reinforces the continuation of traditional subsistence agriculture while also promoting increased political conflict that is directly connected to local politics, social relationships, and land ownership.

About the Author

Iván Sandoval-Cervantes is a doctoral student in cultural anthropology at the University of Oregon. He is interested in the political economy of rural communities in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. His research focuses on the connections between Mexico's land reform, migration and local agrarian conflicts in Oaxaca.

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1 Introduction

The Zapotec Indigenous village of Zegache, in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, has a long history of combining subsistence agriculture with other forms of economic activities; in the last few decades (especially after the 1990s), remittances sent from the United States have become one important source of income for Zegache families. This pattern of "mixed" economy is found in many examples that describe the "transnationalization" of communities, villages, and households, a phenomenon that has been widely and meticulously studied. However, as Lynn Stephen (2007) suggests, there is a need to broaden the analytical tools with which "transnational communities" are studied as to include other "border crossing" experiences. Such experiences show that villages, such as Zegache, were not just recently incorporated into the "global economy" but, in fact, have long historical trajectories that connect their political, economic, and social structures to wider regional, national, and international contexts.

It is in this setting that I seek to analyze the historical transformations that have shaped the relation between subsistence agriculture, local politics, and migration patterns in Zegache and that allowed remittances to play an ever increasing role in the control over land. In order to do this, this paper will start in the second half of the 19th century when Mexico was being governed by what some historians have called "the Oaxacan dynasty" (Chassen-López 1989). During this period, and under the liberal banner, the first wave of modernizing projects started in Mexico and in Oaxaca. These policies reinforced old regional structures, created new regional dynamics and, albeit temporarily, opened up the regional land market.

Zegache is located in the valley of Zimatlán, in the region known as the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. In this paper, I will start by briefly describing the particular role that the Central Valleys had during the Oaxacan dynasty and in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). This period had an important effect in the shaping of subsistence agriculture, especially in the possible connections that can be drawn between the post-revolutionary agrarian reform and the competing factions in Zegache.

It was during the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution that the existing conflict in the village got inscribed mainly as an agrarian conflict. As the Mexican bureaucracy established new regulations over the use of land, different local groups came together and used these channels to reframe an age-old conflict as a dispute over land, and over the ways in which land was owned. This prompted the opposition of those villagers who favored the communal ownership of land (*comuneros)*, and those who claimed to be private proprietors (*propietarios)*.

The conflict between these two factions was also made evident in the struggles over the local authority positions, both municipal and agrarian. These positions of formal authority were part of a civic-religious system known in Mexico as the *mayordomía* and were also tied to the customary system of Indigenous justice and government system called *usos y costumbres*. These two systems will be explained in further detail later in this paper, suffice to say here is that this system did not appoint local authorities based on representative democratic electoral processes but on different criteria that included communal service and prestige. However, the *usos y costumbres* system faced some serious challenges in the 1990s. Even though the *usos y costumbres* was legally recognized in Oaxaca during this time, some villagers from Zegache pushed for the change from *usos y costumbres* to the political party, ballot-based electoral system of choosing local authorities. This change also transformed the agrarian conflict, and put even more pressure on the subsistence agricultural system. In fact, it is through the agrarian conflict that transnational capital and the acquisition of land by migrants has been transformed to political power within the village (see Nuitjen 2003).

The conflict within Zegache, which was inscribed as an agrarian conflict after the agrarian reform, and then as an electoral conflict, also affected and was affected by the changes in migration patterns that both enabled and constrained the involvement of some households and kin groups in the conflict. *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas'* involvement in migration and other economic activities were influenced by local and regional structures, institutions, and historical processes. Transnational migration and remittances become especially important in the past decade as the agrarian conflict escalated and continuous attempts were made to obtain legal security from both the *comuneros* and the *propietarios*.

Zegache's participation in regional, national, and international economic processes are not limited to the increase in transnational migration that occurred in the 1990s when the agrarian conflict intensified, but are part of the modernization process that started in the second half of the 19th century. Here, I follow Sassen's (2000) views on globalization as a differentiated process that enables and restricts mobility and that has allowed for the creation of "global households" (Safri and Graham 2010) that connect family networks located in multiple locations through economic and non-economic chains of production. In this sense, I contend, in order to understand how subsistence agriculture has changed and influenced migration patterns and political conflicts, it has to be conceptualized as a "de-nationalized" phenomenon (Sassen 2003) that calls into question pre-defined notions of the local, the national, and the global.

The political history of land reforms and regulations create a context in which both of the competing factions were trying to make the other faction's claims invalid. With the infusion of transnational capital, through remittances, households that had more migrants were able to provide more capital for the faction that they supported. In this sense, as Zoomers (2010: 43) states, "local development [became] increasingly played out in a matrix of links that enable connections to be made between people and places on a world scale" through transnational migration. Global capital is clearly influencing the reconfiguration of the meaning and ways in which land is used in Zegache (Borras et al. 2012). However, this incipient process of land grabbing was not due to "large scale" commercial transactions (Borras et al. 2011: 210) and it seems to be centered on the political significance of land, and not primarily on the economic importance (Borras et al. 2012)—although both factors are important. The concluding part of this essay will address the extent to which the case of Zegache and the use of remittances and land can be considered as land grabbing.

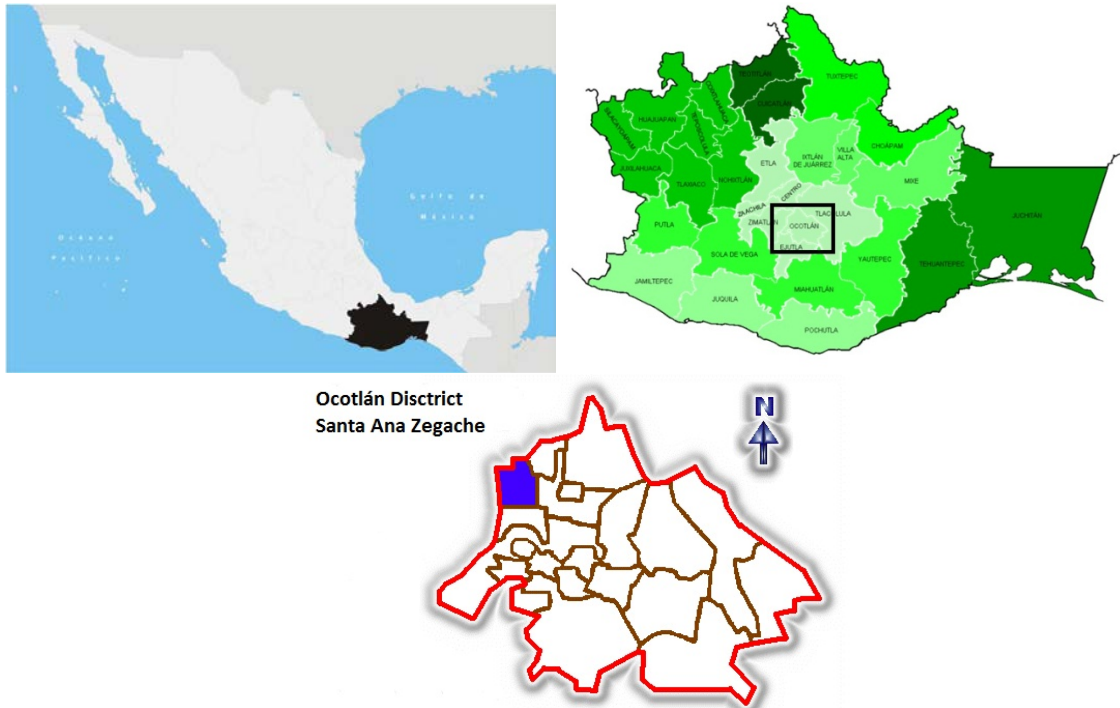

Figure 1. The location of Oaxaca in Mexico (top left), the location of the Ocotlán District in Oaxaca (top right), and the location of Santa Ana Zegache in Ocotlán—on the border with Zimatlán (bottom). Taken from www.wikipedia.com and www.e-local.gob.mx.

The information presented and analyzed here is the product of six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Zegache, Oaxaca and in Oregon during the summers of 2011 and 2012. Fieldwork consisted of participant-observation, numerous informal conversations, and I also conducted 30 ethnographic interviews with people from Zegache in Oaxaca and in the U.S. I also conducted archival research at the Registro Agrario Nacional (National Agrarian Archive) and the State Archive. This paper is part of an ongoing research project on Zegache, land, and migration.

2 The Making of Regions in Oaxaca: The First Wave of Modernization

The official history of Mexico often emphasizes the role that the Mexican Revolution had in the distribution and redistribution of land to landless peasants that had been dispossessed by the long rule of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910). The Mexican Revolution is seen as a watershed moment that, to a great extent, abolished the *hacienda* system of indentured servitude that had had a significant role in Mexico. In addition, the official history goes, the Oaxacan peasantry did not play an important role in the revolutionary project. In fact, the Oaxacan peasantry (composed by a wide variety of different Indigenous groups) has been described as "conservative", "backwards", and "anti-revolutionary" (Waterbury 1975). However, Oaxacan historians have challenged this view and claim that the "atypical" Oaxacan case can be explained by analyzing the detailed history of how Oaxaca was transformed during the so-called Oaxacan dynasty (see Esparza 1988) that later interpreted the Mexican Revolution as an imposition "that came from the north" (see Chassen-Lopez 1989: 163). In this section, I will provide a brief account on how the long Oaxacan rule over Mexico and its liberal reforms created regional differences in Oaxaca, and how these differences influenced the Revolutionary project in Oaxaca, especially in the Central Valleys where Zegache is located.

Before Porfirio Díaz occupied the presidential chair in Mexico, another Oaxacan president had started a liberal economic transformation of Mexico, especially of Mexico's countryside. Benito Juárez who, like Díaz, came from an Indigenous background governed Mexico from 1858 to 1872 (serving five times as president). During his presidency, Juárez sought to eliminate communal property that belonged to the Church but also to Indigenous communities that had preserved communal land since colonial times. This was an attempt by Juárez to eliminate those hindrances that kept Mexico from becoming a "modern" country; for Mexico to become modern, private property had to be installed. The implementation of these Reform Laws (especially the *Ley Lerdo* of 1856), had profound effects in Oaxaca's villages and their relation to land. However, the effects of these laws were shaped by the social, cultural, and productive landscapes that existed in the different regions that compose the state.

The modernization process that started with Juárez's Reform Laws was followed by Díaz's infrastructural changes that included the constructions of roads and the expansion of Mexico's railway system. These roads and railways were designed to incorporate the production of export crops from "porfirian commercial agricultural development" (Chassen-López 1989) into the global market. The crops that were being produced were sugar cane, tobacco, and coffee. Because of the specific conditions that these crops need not all regions participated equally in this modernization process. Those regions that did participate in this process (Tuxtepec-Choapam, Istmo, Cañada, and Costa) experienced the transformation of their landscapes, as the export crops required new labor-intensive relations of production that were not present in Oaxaca – a state that was still predominantly Indigenous and rural. These "new" capitalistic relations of production became intertwined with "pre-capitalistic" Indigenous traditions. In fact, Chassen-López (1989: 173-174) argues, capitalist relations of production were only able to function because of the "old" relations of production. This also led to the creation of large states, also known as *haciendas*.

The modernization process implemented by the Oaxacan dynasty reinforced regional differences, and it might have created migratory patterns between those regions that were part of the modernization project and those that were not. One of the regions that did not participate in the production of export crops was the region of the Central Valleys, but this did not mean that the villages in the Central Valleys were not transformed. Although there were not many large estates in this region, local elites had managed to establish and maintain control over land and political structures (Esparza 1988: 288). This local elite group, that received the name of *Vallistocracia* (valleystrocracy), created a relationship of interdependence with the Oaxacan dynasty, especially because it was directly connected to a growing urban center such as Oaxaca City, and because they were considered the "new owners" of the "porfirian modernization" project as they controlled a significant amount of the state's work force (in 1910, one in three Oaxacans lived in the Central Valleys) (see Ruiz Cervantes 1988: 336-351).

After the Mexican Revolution started in 1910, those regions of Oaxaca that had been modernized in order to directly participate in the global market were more receptive to revolutionary ideas, while those regions that had only an indirect participation in export crops opposed the Revolution. The revolutionary forces, which were many and very diverse, encroached on the *Vallistocracia* threatening the regional structures of authority and control, a movement that opposed the Revolution was formed, they were referred to as the *Soberanistas* (see Ruiz Cervantes 1988). The *Soberanistas*, also known as the "defenders of Oaxaca" (Ruiz Cervantes 1988:470), opposed Venustiano Carranza's revolutionary project. After almost five years of entrenched opposition the *Carrancistas* defeated the *Soberanistas* in 1914.

Once Carranza took over Oaxaca, one of his main objectives was to disarticulate the *Vallistocracia*; this was done through the authoritarian imposition of local authorities and, later on, through

agrarian reform. Through the direct and authoritarian imposition of local authorities and the militarization of the municipalities that were considered “anti-revolutionary”. According to Garner (1984: 241-244), the process of militarization included removing, “urgently”, all of those local authorities that were deemed as “corrupted”. Corrupted authorities, or other civilians that were suspected to have contact with “rebels” were subjected to execution, arrest, or they could lose their possessions. The military forces that were in charge of enforcing Carranza’s new regulations regularly committed abuses that were “ignored”, and often times entered into violent conflicts with the municipal authorities.

The imposition, first, of liberal reforms and the liberalization of land markets and, after that, of the agrarian reform shifted the meaning and the use of land (see Borras et al. 2012: 850). The brief period between the liberal reforms of the 18th century and the agrarian reform that followed the Mexican Revolution created a group of private landowners who were later dispossessed by Carranza’s revolutionary government. A process of domestic land grabbing that had taken place in other parts of Oaxaca did not fully affect Zegache but it created conflicts over land that, because of the legal contradictions and bureaucratic processes, were not easily resolved.

3 *Comuneros* and *Propietarios*: The Inscribing of a Conflict as an Agrarian Conflict

The Revolution does not occupy a significant role in the social history of Zegache;l; people do not talk about it nor do they mention it as an important event that changed the history of their village. The social history of Zegache revolves around the factions that define daily life in Oaxaca and in the other sites where *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* live. The origin of the factions is often obscured by the narratives that emphasize the violence of this factionalism.

The first mention of this conflict in the archival record appears in a 1943 letter written by Zegache’s municipal president in which he requested the establishment of communal lands in his village. Although the technical work needed to resolve this petition did not start until the 1980s, it was at this moment that the conflict was inscribed as an agrarian conflict and it was precisely through the language of agrarian reform that the conflict was articulated. The terminology used to define the two factions appeared: those who requested the recognition of communal lands were called *comuneros* and those who opposed it, on the basis that they had legally purchased land and paid the required taxes, were labeled *propietarios*.

The information on this conflict is scarce and scattered, and it is only possible to get a glimpse of how it continued to define the day-to-day interactions of *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* through few archival records and oral histories. In both of these data sets, the 1970s is highlighted as an especially problematic period when agrarian representatives (that is, people who represented the *comuneros*) and municipal authorities started a conflict that involved agrarian authorities accusing municipal authorities of buying and selling land illegally. This period is remember by Zegache’s villagers today as *la época de los valientes*, the time of brave men, when armed men prowled the streets of Zegache “flexing their muscles” and threatening every man and woman who was not part of their group (personal interview). The intensity of the conflict seems to have decreased when one of Zegache’s agrarian representatives was chased out of the village by a municipal president who favored private property. However, the conflict between agrarian and municipal authorities still exists today, and agrarian authorities are not officially recognized and are forced to hold their meetings in a private house.

Agrarian reform has often been described as the "main accomplishment" of the Mexican Revolution, especially because it has been one of the largest land redistribution programs in Latin America. However, agrarian reform was never the "most prominent issue" in Oaxaca (Garner 1984: 290). In fact, the language provided by the bureaucratic procedures of agrarian reform allowed many conflicts over territorial limits to resurface. Land reform and land distribution in Oaxaca after the Revolution only represented 2% of the national total of redistributed land (Garner 1984: 292). The fact that Zegache's request for communal land appears in the 1940s, needs to take into account the possible local scenarios in which the conflict over land was part of a larger political conflict that aimed at controlling land that was used for subsistence agriculture.

The importance of the period that immediately followed the Revolution and the request for communal land cannot be emphasized enough. It was probably during this period that potential factions in Zegache became polarized. For example, during an informal interview in the summer of 2012, a well-known artist from Zegache told me that, according to his grandfather, it was after the Revolution that a group of armed men came into Zegache. These men, former revolutionary fighters, had no respect for the local authorities that were based on communal assemblies and civic-religious obligations; since they were armed, the local authorities could do little to control them. Some families had to leave Zegache because of the violence that overtook the village; the painter's family moved to Oaxaca City, where the painter has lived most of his life, although he still owns a house in Zegache and has many relatives living there.

This history suggests that the Revolution modified the conditions that regulated the use of land, and the ways in which people had access to it. It also suggests that people who were siding with the "armed men" were not supportive of the local government; this seems to be made evident in the 1970s violent conflict between agrarian and local authorities. In this scenario, the conflict over land and the attempts of land grabbing by the *propietarios* side was not entirely based on economic interests but it was also an attempt to control political positions. Land grabbing, in this case, became a political strategy more than an economic one.

The conflict between *comuneros* and *propietarios* has also had some unexpected consequences. For example, the "land regularization" project, called PROCEDE (*Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos* or Certification of Ejidal Rights and Titling of Urban Plots Program established in 1992), that was part of the neoliberal set of economic policies that were part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), sought to privatize land in rural Mexico in order to make the Mexican countryside more productive and competitive in relation to its northern neighbors. However, because of the heightened suspicion that the agrarian conflict has created among *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas*, the "privatization" of land did not take place as it was mainly opposed by the *propietarios*.

The rejection of PROCEDE has allowed many *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* who live in Zegache, in other parts of Mexico, and in the United States to still rely heavily on subsistence agriculture. Migratory patterns are influenced by the agrarian conflict, and remittances (both from Mexico and from the U.S.) are often used to supplement subsistence agricultural practices and the legal procedures associated with the conflict.

This brief historical narrative of Zegache's agrarian conflict and its links to the first wave of modernization and liberal policies that were outlined in the previous section, is meant to show how land and subsistence agriculture should not be merely conceptualized as local phenomena that interacts in a "nested" hierarchy that subsumes the local under the regional, the regional under the national, and the national under the global (Sassen 2003). The case of Zegache shows how there is a need to examine "different modes of regional-to-global interconnections" (Tsing 2002: 471) while

keeping in mind that global processes get constituted sub-nationally (Sassen 2003:3). This will be made even more evident once migration patterns are discussed in relation to Zegache's history.

4 Party Politics and Religion in Zegache: The Reinterpretation of the Agrarian Conflict

As it was mentioned before, Zegache's agrarian conflict involved the struggle between agrarian and municipal authorities as they belong to the *comuneros* and *propietarios* respectively. It was also mentioned that this conflict seems to have erupted, although not necessarily in the language of agrarian reform, when a group of former revolutionaries defied local authorities. Today, and since the last decade of the 20th century the conflict has been reinterpreted as a conflict between political parties. This reinterpretation is based on a complex history that involves the challenging of the local and Indigenous customary system of governance called *usos y costumbres*, and the changing national political context.

Before the 1990s, Zegache was governed by the local customary governance system of *usos y costumbres*. Although the term *usos y costumbres* is hard to define, as it represents different things for different villages and it is based on local experiences of self-government, I will provide a brief description of what it is. *Usos y costumbres* is a system of local governance and justice administration that is based on decisions taken at communal assemblies. Local authorities are elected in these assemblies that in past were mostly composed by male household heads but now include female villagers as well. However, "candidates" for municipal positions can only be selected from a pool of villagers that have already accomplished specific communal obligations and that have proven to be responsible and knowledgeable members of society. The communal obligations are often associated with the civic-religious hierarchy known as *mayordomía*, in which a person serves, without a salary and often paying out of his or her own pocket, as the host of different community activities such as a celebratory feast in which the patron saint of the village is honored. Since this requires considerable amounts of wealth (both in species and in cash) only well-off households can have this "privilege". Some scholars of the *mayordomía* or *fiesta* system tend to see this mechanism as part of a redistributive logic imbedded in an egalitarian peasant ideology; others see it as a way in which local elites both justify and validate existing inequalities. In most cases, a person can only become a municipal president after having been a *mayordomo*, which means that positions of political authority are directly linked to communal and religious obligations.

Zegache followed this customary law until very late in the 1990s, and the push away from this law can be connected to the agrarian conflict. For the sake of brevity, I will provide one possible scenario of how and why customary law was opposed by villagers. In Zegache, local authorities decided who they believed should serve as the *mayordomo*, which was regularly done after a couple married. Since being a *mayordomo* implied spending significant amounts of wealth, not everybody was willing to take on this responsibility. This led to the local authorities' decision to force this obligation upon some members of the community, which resulted in the open rejection of some people to participate in this system. Perhaps with more empirical data this rejection could also be analyzed in terms of the factions that controlled local authority positions. People who did not want to participate were seen, by some members, as "going against tradition".

The customary law system also required villagers to participate in communal labor (*tequio*). If villagers refused to participate in the *tequio* they could be incarcerated for one or two days. This was also seen as an imposition by some villagers. According to local versions, the resistance to participate in these "traditional ways" increased in the 1970s when people resisted arrest.

The customary law system needs to be understood within Oaxaca's and Mexico's recognition of Indigenous rights and the broader political context. The customary law system was only legally recognized in the 1990s, in the context of the ratification of Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization in 1990, and of the Zapatista rebellion of 1994. In addition, Mexico's political system was going through a "process" of democratization that involved the strengthening of two opposition parties that challenged the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI for *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) rule. The right-leaning National Action Party (PAN for *Partido de Acción Nacional*) and the left-leaning Democratic Revolution Party (PRD for *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*) became important contestants in the national political scene. In fact, the long rule that the PRI established after the revolution only ended in 2000 when the PAN won the presidential elections. Zegache's move away from the customary law system has to be understood in this national and international context, as well as in the village's internal struggle over the customary system.

According to some analysts (see Recondo 1999, 2001; Anaya Muñoz 2001) the "legalization" of *usos y costumbres* did not necessarily change the relationship between Indigenous municipalities and the State; they believe that it was a political strategy used by the PRI to neutralize potential loses. The advocates of this argument contend that *usos y costumbres* was already practiced in many municipalities and legalizing this system barely changed the local situations (see Recondo 2001: 110).

The history of Zegache's opting out of the customary law system is still in need of more empirical data as well as archival and ethnographic work. However, in 1998, Zegache became one of the few Indigenous municipalities to have implemented the electoral party-based system. Although, at the beginning, the PRI remained in office, several local versions suggest that representatives of the PAN moved in quickly into the village creating an incipient opposition that did not last too long; oddly enough most people who supported the right-wing PAN later on joined the left-wing PRD in the 2000s. The PRD has been in office since 2004.

The conflict between political parties and the agrarian conflict overlap in ways that again seem to suggest that we look at the ways in which the "multi-scalar politics of the local" (Sassen 2003: 11) create connections that often do not respond to conventional scales of politics. In the case of Zegache, the PRI, the party that originally started the neoliberal turn in Mexico and the party that signed NAFTA in 1994, is associated with the defenders of communal land, while the leftist party (the PRD) is the party that represents those in favor of privatization.

The conflict between PRI and PRD highlights the links between the move away from customary law into the party system and the local agrarian conflict, which up to this day shapes the daily experience of *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas*. The way in which people in Zegache use land has been reinterpreted through different political lenses that include the language of the agrarian reform and the language of the national political party system. Although land in Zegache continues to be an important factor in the production of foodstuffs, land is also an important political tool (Nuitjen 2003) that can mobilize labor and create alliances. The use of remittances in acquiring land and in supplementing capital for the legal procedures associated with the agrarian conflict has become an important factor in the local political conflict and in the migration patterns that will be analyzed below.

5 Migration and the Agrarian Conflict

Although Zegache could be easily described as a "transnational" village that exists simultaneously in the U.S. (particularly in Oregon) and in Oaxaca, this would suggest that outer migration from Zegache started in the 1990s, when people from Zegache (especially men) were incorporated into the migration networks of the neighboring village of Santiago Apóstol, that had a longer history of migration and well-established communities in California and Oregon. However, this representation would be misleading because it would deny the fact that many *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* were already part of translocal communities in other parts of Mexico. The history of Zegache's migrants includes multiple waves and layers of movement that start with the forced displacements that occurred after the Mexican Revolution and that probably extend even further away in time with *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheños* working in the production of export crops during the Porfiriato.

To provide more context, I will provide a short sketch of some of the main events that can be used to characterize Zegache's migration history after the Mexican Revolution. During the 1950s, *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* were involved in the harvesting of cotton in the state of Chiapas. Although this was seasonal work, it connected many households in Zegache to the global market; cotton production in Chiapas started declining in the 1970s and thus many *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* were not able to participate in this seasonal labor. During the 1960s and the 1970s, numerous women from Zegache started leaving their households and working as domestic employees in Mexico City. This experience allowed many women to have "transborder" experiences that included critically evaluating ideas about gender roles. Also, during the 1970s, a high volume of men from Zegache started joining the Mexican military in an attempt to earn a salary that would allow them and their families to be better-off. Many of the men who joined the military were also part of the first groups of regular migration to the United States, which started occurring more regularly in the 1990s. Many of the people from Zegache who have migrated, or participated in seasonal work, have returned to Zegache and have become involved in the agrarian struggle in different ways. In the case of women, it is evident that those women who have had "transborder" experiences are more willing to challenge their gender roles both within their households and in the agrarian conflict, and we can see how more women are becoming important spokespersons for the two factions.

Some of these processes were connected to the urbanization and industrialization processes that were taking place in Mexico in the second half of the 20th century. This gave rise to an urban middle class in the 1950s that allowed the recruitment of an "expendable" workforce from the rural hinterlands (see Sacks 1989: 541). However, the construction of regions during this time was later reshaped by other "sub-national" actors, such as the increase in international migration in nearby villages. Zegache did not have a public transport system nor did it have a road that allowed easy access to the village until the 1970s when people from Santiago Apóstol started running a bus service that went through Zegache. This was mainly possible because Santiago Apóstol had a well-established migrant community in California that provided the necessary remittances to start this business. Later on, during the 1980s and 1990s, a road was built which gave easier access to *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* to Oaxaca City. Nevertheless, as Anna Tsing (2005: 6) states, "the ease of travel [that roads] facilitate is also a structure of confinement". After the roads connected Zegache to Oaxaca City, most young men and women tended to commute daily to work in Oaxaca City, a city that is famous for its tourist industry.

In this regard, most households in Zegache have always been part of "global households" that are defined by Safri and Graham (2010) as institutions that connect family networks located in multiple locations through economic activities and through "non-commodity chains of global household

production" that include different forms of care that give emotional content to social bonds that can also be economic. For example, Teodoro, who is 75, self-identifies as a peasant and claims to have never left Zegache. However, he worked as a cotton harvester in the 1970s and currently four (one daughter and three sons) of his six children (three daughters and three sons) live in the U.S. Teodoro works in his fields every day, and during the late summer harvests corn, beans, squash, and peanuts. Most of his crops are used to provide food for his family, which includes his daughters, his son-in-law, and his grandchildren – one of whom is the son of Teodoro's oldest son who lives in California. Teodoro identifies as a *propietario*, and as a *campesino*. Yet, his ability to preserve his land and to provide food for his family has always been deeply connected to regional, national, and global structures that are not hierarchically "nested" (Sassen 2003) and that constrain the movement of some groups of villagers, especially women, by making them responsible for maintaining emotional bonds and for providing child and elder care. It is in this sense that globalization creates mobilities and fixities (Sassen 2000) that are distributed differently among the poor and the wealthy, the young and the old, and the men and the women.

In Zegache, it is possible to see how agricultural practices have to be understood considering the particular history of migration and the agrarian-political conflict. For example, the 'feminization' of agriculture (Preibisch, et al. 2002), a pattern that has been observed in other parts of Mexico and that is directly connected to increased migratory activity, has not taken place in Santa Ana Zegache and while women are involved in subsistence agriculture there does not seem to be strong evidence to suggest that agriculture has been "feminized". I argue that, in part, this has not happened in Zegache because of the marginal place that Zegache's agricultural production occupied with respect to regional and national markets, but principally because of the local agrarian conflict.

This marginal place of Zegache's agricultural production in national and international markets has not excluded Zegache from convergent multiple crises that have been observed to give rise to land grabbing (Borras et al. 2012). For example, the global economic crises of 2008 combined with the local political struggle over Zegache's municipal government, produced an increased rate of return migration that was motivated by the threat of losing their lands and by the rise of unemployment in the U.S. Those households that had return migrants, who had lost access to cash flow and become subsistence peasants again, were in more vulnerable positions that those households that still had access to remittances.

For example, Pablo, one of these return migrants, went back to Zegache in 2009 motivated by the threat that *proprietarios* were posing both to his family and his family's land. During his first two years after his return, Pablo was one of the main advocates for communal land. As time passed and savings got low, Pablo had to engage in other activities (such as driving a collective taxi) while also growing subsistence crops. However, a third crisis emerged, as the increase in gasoline prices affected car fuel which created even more economic pressure. In 2012, Pablo was thinking about selling his land. Pablo's land will probably be acquired by a household that still has access to remittances.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to describe and analyze the intricate links that exist between land, politics, and migration in the Indigenous village of Zegache, in the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico and how these processes connect to the change in the meaning and use of land. Zegache's agriculture has been deeply affected by these links and changes. In fact, Zegache's strong reliance on subsistence agriculture has been a by-product of the intricacy of these conflicts. The politico-agrarian factions that have existed in the village at least since the 1940s define with whom a person is allowed to

exchange corn seeds, labor, and crops. The social networks that inform sharecropping and the sharing and exchange of seeds and corn are defined by this factionalism; this factionalism often cross-cuts socio-economic classes.

In order to understand why land and subsistence agriculture continue to be an important issue for *Zegacheños* and *Zegacheñas* living in Zegache, in other parts of the Mexico, and in U.S., we need to conceptualize the agrarian history of Zegache as not being defined by nested hierarchies of scale that subsume the local under the national, and the national under the global. In fact the more radical claim is that we analyze Zegache's history as a de-national process. This does not mean that we must get rid of the scale of the national, or that we should neglect the importance of the State and nation building, only that we "historicize" how such a scale has been constructed (Sassen 2003: 4-5). To do this, I believe that a concept such as the "global household" (Safri and Graham 2010) is important because it incorporates transborder experiences (Stephen 2007) and sees subsistence agriculture as a fundamental component not only of the experience of *Zegacheñas* and *Zegacheños* living in Zegache but also of those that live in Mexico City and in the U.S. This way we can see how the resilience of Zegache's subsistence agriculture has shaped and has been shaped by all sorts of local, regional, national, and global processes.

Not all global households are equal, and the access that each household has both in terms of labor, networks, and access to remittances will influence to an important degree their capacity to preserve their land and to acquire new land. However, because of the legal issues that are yet to be defined on whether Zegache's land is communal or private, buying land is also a risky business that can create more problems than the ones that it can solve (this is similar to what happened after the agrarian reform that annulled properties acquired after Juárez's liberal reform). For these reasons, Zegache's land grabbing phenomenon is oriented more towards gaining access to local politics (and, perhaps, from there to transforming legal issues regarding the status of land) than towards commercial agriculture.

Whether this can be considered as "land grabbing" is an open question. On the one hand, Zegache's land has not been used to produce large commercial food or non-food (biofuel) crops, and it is not part of a large capitalistic enterprise. On the other hand, it does fulfill some of the defining elements of land grabbing (the influence of transnational capital, the change in meaning and use, and the fact that it happens in the context of convergent crises). Moreover, Zoomers (2010: 440) also contends that land purchases by migrants are one of the seven processes of global land grabbing.

More empirical research is needed to see if differential access to remittances continues to be directly connected to land grabbing, and how this can influence the legal conflict over the management of land. Access to resources, both economic and social, influences migration patterns and, in turn, the remittances that migrants send consolidate socio-economic difference within Zegache. If this trend continues, then land grabbing will be done along the lines of socio-economic differentiation and can eventually lead to a more paradigmatic case of global land grabbing.

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LDPI Working Paper Series

A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

The political value of land, remittances and a possible case of land grabbing: The case of an Indigenous village in Oaxaca, Mexico

This paper explores the ways in which transantional capital is reshaping land politics in the Zapotec Indigenous community of Zegache, Oaxaca. Oaxaca is a predominantly rural state in southern Mexico, characterized by land conflicts and a high rate of migration. Zegache, in the Zimatlán Valley, is not a stranger to these phenomena; its economy depends on remittances and nonindustrialized agriculture, and land is still a central element in local political conflicts. Zegache's inhabitants are divided between comuneros (those who defend communal land) and propietarios (who are in favor of private property), and this division informs the political struggles not only in Oaxaca but also in the immigrant community of Zegacheños living in Oregon, U.S. Here, I will explore how transnational capital reinforces the continuation of traditional subsistence agriculture while also promoting increased political conflict that is directly connected to local politics, social relationships, and land ownership.

landpolitics@gmail.com

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