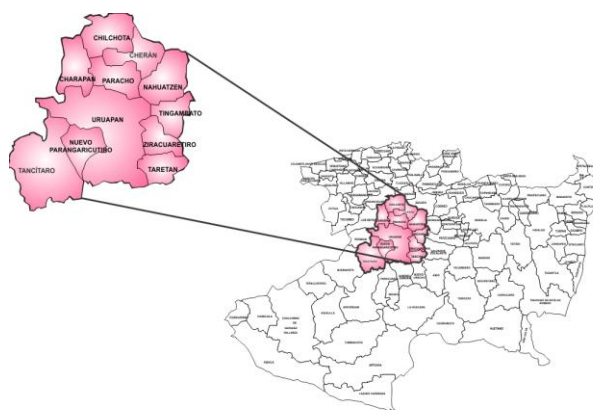


CHERÁN PROTECTS AND REBUILDS ITS LAND

Interview with Sharenir Maciel Alcantar from the Autonomous Town Council of Cherán Keri, Mexico

Cherán is a town located in the heart of the Meseta Purépecha in Michoacán, Mexico. On 15 April 2011 the women decided to stand up and say "Enough is Enough!" to deforesters, to organised crime, to municipal governing authorities, as well as to political parties and the police. This uprising was marshalled following the threat of drought and the felling of 20,000 hectares of woods from the town's total of 27,000².



Meseta Purépecha. Source: <http://foros.michoacan.gob.mx/region-6/>

The women decided to take action in defence and protection of their land. They were not willing to put the men at risk because many were already disappearing or being murdered. The women assembled the entire community with the ringing of the El Calvario neighbourhood bells. They built a huge bonfire blocking the path of the fellers, throwing stones, sticks and fireworks. The resistance went on for six months and the bonfires were kept lit for its entire duration³. Nowadays the bonfires are lit each month.

The community of Cherán assembled and decided to set up a local self-government. They fought by national and international legal means to secure recognition of the decision to govern themselves by customs and traditions. They filed a constitutional controversy before the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) seeking recognition of the right, and winning the case on 12 May 2014. The controversy was successful and the SCJN for the first time recognised a Council chosen by customs and traditions. A Municipal Community Council was formed, which was given the name of Higher Council and granted representative functions

¹ Prof. Rosa Elva Zúñiga is a popular educator and sociologist. Graduate of Sciences in Regional and Rural Development from Chapingo Autonomous Community. She is currently the Secretary General of the Council for Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (CEAAL in Spanish) She co-coordinated the Latin American Programme supporting the Standardisation of CEAAL from 2012 to 2016. Contact: rosaelva.zuniga@gmail.com

² Watch: Documentary on Cherán: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNFyREo3c68&feature=youtu.be>

³ Watch: El fuego nos unió: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMu2Rq-KnNQ>

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before federal, state and local authorities. The Congress of the State of Michoacán is obliged to consult it with regard to Constitutional Reforms⁴.

Cherán is a community that offers hope against this backdrop of violence and death, setting the stage for autonomy and self-determination. They are a model to follow in every community.

They recovered ancestral know-how to regain the strength of the people and their forests. The assembly was officially approved as the maximum decision-making authority. The bonfires became the space to share ideas and proposals to develop good living and to express concerns. On this basis, dialogue with and between families was re-established - the fire had helped to get rid of what was impairing them. The power of the four elements: water, wind, sun and mother earth, played a pivotal role in efforts to defend and replenish the land. "Fire helps heat our food, heat us up when it is cold and it is deity for the Purépecha peoples"⁵.

The community of Cherán Keri sought to work on three aspects: the restoration of its forests, recovering the perimeter of the land through community efforts; restoration of the land, which involved considering another type of organisation, reassessing education and culture; and justice and security, which helped set up "community patrols. The representative authorities of Cherán state that for good living is it necessary to nurture and promote: respect, responsibility, work and good organisation. Cherán has drafted a 30 year-long project where the most important aim is to piece together the social fabric, recover the meaning of community, "only then can be rebuild what we long for".



Foto: Arturo Lara/Somoselmedio.org

4

See:

Constitutional

Controversy

<http://sif.scjn.gob.mx/SJFSem/Paginas/DetalleGeneralScroll.aspx?ID=25285&Clase=DetalleSemanarioEjecutoriaBL>

⁵ Watch: Cherán y el buen vivir. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuH8lfntZkA>

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In this regard, I interviewed Sharenir Maciel Alcantar⁶ from the Commission for Education and Culture of the Higher Council of Cherán Keri.

REZL: What does Cherán Keri mean for you nowadays?

SMA: It represents process. As we are gaining ground on the project we drew up thirty years ago. We have made significant progress. On the whole it has come across difficulties concerning both the Community and the Government structure, but these are outweighed by significant positive developments.

REZL: How did you implement the 30-year Cherán Keri project?

SMA: We worked mainly by seeking advice from people in the community who have extensive studies, particularly in anthropology, history, law, education; with professionals engaged with the community who had knowledge on these processes of autonomy, and with the community of Cherán Keri itself. We have made changes in the last five years and other priorities have emerged; this is why we have adapted in line with needs. In addition to renewing the structure, we have incorporated things that were not originally planned.

REZL: How is the government structure formed?

SMA: There is a Higher Council responsible for assisting the Operational Councils. They are the highest ranking bodies but are not in charge, the Assembly is the authority. The Government comprises the Higher Council and eight Operational Councils that carry out the tasks that ordinarily a town/city council would be in charge of, but not with that structure.

REZL: What is the main responsibility of the eight Operational Councils?

SMA: The Civil Affairs Council takes an administrative role. It is responsible for the Commission for Education and Culture, public health, sports and crafts. The Local Administration Council looks after other local needs, such as rubbish, drinking water, light, streets, works. The Social Programme Council is responsible for overseeing the schemes that are filtered down to us from the Federal Government. The Neighbourhood Council liaises with the Government structure and the Assemblies. They are also in charge of the Political Commission, responsible for addressing legal issues. They communicate most with the Assemblies. The Women's Council that is responsible for women's assistance programs and for promoting female political participation has recently been incorporated to the Government structure, just like the Youth Council. The purpose of these Councils is to seek the participation of women and young people. The Common Goods Council is in charge of communal businesses in the community as well as everything involving the territory and the Procurement and Justice Council; they address all legal aspects. Aside from the Councils there is Community Patrol, which is the responsibility of the community surveillance services.

REZ: Let's talk about your responsibilities. What does your role consist of?

SMA: It entails a community education proposal. The idea is to incorporate the Purépecha language into all levels of education, from pre-school up to university. Our community depends on university education, the National Pedagogical University, the technology university, the normal one. The aim is to integrate the Purépecha language and re-appropriate the Purépecha culture. This does not mean recovering it, because it is not entirely lost - that applies to the

⁶ Sharenir Maciel Alcantar is a member of the Commission for Education and Culture of the Higher Council of Cherán Keri, Michoacán.

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education part. Insofar as culture is concerned, it involves recovering traditions and discovering how they have been evolving, because culture is not stagnant - it is continuously renewed, especially because we have a large migrant population.

REZL: Now that you are in your fifth year of autonomy, I am surprised by how much participation there is from children and young people, playing instruments and showcasing different artistic numbers. This demonstrates reconfiguration. Was it like this before 15 April 2011, or has their involvement been reshaped?

SMA: The participation of children has grown. There had previously been forms of folklore dancing but there was a lack of emphasis placed on them. In the past, they only took part in schools, but now their involvement has grown. The participation of orchestras has grown. We have an orchestra made up of seventy boys and girls. There is the Symphonic Band. Groups with primarily young boys and girls. The range of cultural activities is solid.

REZL: What has this process of autonomy in Cherán meant for the children and young people? Especially if you think that just five years ago you too were much younger than you are now.

SMA: The young people of today were little boys and girls five years ago. I see many who have taken it on board, but there are some who do not wish to be involved. Almost all of them leave to study elsewhere. They are no longer embarrassed to say they are members of this community, they are instead proud of acknowledging their roots.

REZL: On the subject of leaving to study elsewhere, are young people still leaving or do they stay to build the community?

SMA: Young people are still leaving. But now they are returning and giving back to the community.

REZL: One thing that has surprised me about children is their freedom to express their thoughts and their determination to say either yes or no, which is not the norm in Mexico considering little boys and girls grow up fearful or unsafe, particularly due to the adult-centric culture. What has the process meant for you?

SMA: There are two contextual situations: one is that Cherán Keri is one of the safest towns in Michoacán, so children can feel safe and are not forbidden from going out to the street. I don't see this in neighbouring communities because they are overrun by organised crime. In this case, the children are confined to their homes. The other is that there have been many people concerned about working with young boys and girls. For example, this school year will see the launch of a book created by the same people of the community and worked on by the young boys and girls, written by themselves. The book will be used in the following academic year and distributed to all of the schools. Its title is in Purépercha, but in Spanish it is called "Cherán Keri, reconociendo nuestro territorio" [Cherán Keri, recognising our territory].

REZL: I think it is extremely important to restore the territory as part of the source of community life.

SMA: One thing that has happened is that in all of the activities carried out, we aim to involve the children. For example, fifteen days ago we had a sky lantern competition and there was a category specifically for children. They were given the material and created their own designs. We seek participation from children in all of the spaces.

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REZL: What you are saying is really important, because if we do not provide them with the spaces, we are overshadowing them. What would you recommend to people teaching popular education with regard to processes like the one embarked on by Cherán Keri?

SMA: It is a rather big commitment.

REZL: You could also share what you have learned from your experience on the project.

SMA: In the past, we had treated popular education as a type of informal education. It does not take place within an institution or school, yet remains extremely important because education is for life. Through the use of leisure time, teaching how to survive and coexist... Using this approach we have worked to make sure that children know their territory, it is life-long involvement.

REZL: Before starting the interview you mentioned that you were a member of another Council, which was it?

SMA: The Women's Council.

REZL: This brings me on to the question, what things have the women in Cherán worked on?

SMA: Firstly, it was necessary to create a space for women, especially because they initiated the revolt in Cherán. A space where they could express themselves and meet their basic needs as women. On top of this, they are the most important pillar of a family. The Council was formed especially to enhance their participation. As it was a new Council we started from scratch, there were no specific guidelines. This is why we started to define our key aim. On this basis, we began to focus on the advantages that could be obtained by engaging with the entire community, beyond just women. At the moment we are in the process of developing tools, because the majority of us lacked the skills for working with women, or we were women who had not worked in this type of administration or on these issues. It meant training ourselves before being able to train others. It was a slow and intense process, but we have achieved so much.

REZL: Did you receive external support?

SMA: We started off internally but now we receive assistance from a non-profit association that works with women. To some extent, we now have a guide to follow.

REZL: It was a very powerful and meaningful experience to speak with the women at the bonfires on 14 April. They talked about their perseverance to defend their territory, but also how they overcame fear.

SMA: They are the ones keeping the bonfire going. The majority of men have more comprehensive political participation, but they stay there, maintaining and guarding the fire.

REZL: How would you like to end the interview?

SMA: By telling you that you are welcome to visit in Cherán Keri whenever you wish ☺

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For more information on Cherán, visit the following websites:

Choosing the second Higher Council:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvgIADwPZFE>

The swearing in of the second Higher Council:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPEgIk_yND4

Common Goods Council:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmBxNN3_avA

Sky Lantern Competition.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dV6IJ75dco

Cherán commoners with Ernesto Ledesma on Perspectivas. Rompeviento TV.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_qcjmsMR-w

Cherán Orchestra:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8tty4fJSMs>