Indigenous Information System in Chiapas, Mexico: Integrating Community Radio, Library and Impact Assessment for Community Development

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Abstract
We discuss an integrated information and evaluation system for indigenous development with the Tzeltal indigenous communities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. We create an integrated system that brings together an indigenous community radio station, an indigenous library and documentation center, and a program to evaluate the impacts of development activities in the region, from an indigenous perspective. This project illustrates interdisciplinary work in information science that combines indigenous world views with modern information technologies, brought together for locally relevant community development.

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1 An Indigenous Information System in Chiapas

How do you organize a library in an indigenous community with an oral tradition and no word in their language for “library”? This a question we seek to answer as we help create a community library in Chiapas, Mexico, one of the country’s poorest States, where indigenous communities make up the majority of the population. Tzeltales are one of the 25 Maya groups in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and El Salvador. There are about 500,000 Tzeltal speakers, making them the largest indigenous group in Chiapas, and the eighth largest indigenous group in Mexico. For over 500 years, the Maya Peoples, including the Tzeltales, have resisted and adapted to maintain their culture, language and tradition, while adopting some of the practices of the dominant Catholic Spanish-speaking culture. The study of Tzeltal syncretism and inculturation is fairly new and ongoing, however, researchers acknowledge that “as the Tzeltal negotiate the continuation of their identity as people of the land in Chiapas, they are challenged with the task of reinterpreting ancient forms of wisdom that enabled generations to live, and live well, with the realities of an ever-expanding globalized community.” (Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007). Tzeltales face important challenges and opportunities with relatively recent infrastructure transformations in southern Mexico, such as roads, electricity, cell phone service, and internet access. In the last 50 years, the Tzeltal People’s efforts to conserve their language and culture received an important boost from the Jesuit Mission of Bachajon in generating hundreds of written documents in the Tzeltal language. Starting with the translation of the Bible, other education materials quickly followed, as part of ambitious community education and leadership training programs to advance the rights, support the culture and strengthen the language of the Tzeltal Maya. Written works now include documentation on agro-ecology, sustainable development and alternative economic models; traditional medicine; conflict mediation and human rights; and leadership training and education.
Local non-profit organizations CEDIAC and CAEC, affiliates of the Jesuit Mission created a community radio station (2013) and a community library and documentation center (2016). The radio broadcasts music and programs in the Tzeltal language, reaching over 30,000 people from many of the 600+ communities scattered over 5,000 square km region of mountainous terrain in southern Chiapas where most are subsistence farmers living off the land. (One Equal Heart, 2016c) It also broadcasts 24/7 online, which gives it the potential to reach the Tzeltal diaspora in other parts of Mexico and abroad. The library is in its early stages of development, and has begun to gather the thousands of Tzeltal language materials, currently stored in a decentralized way among the staff of the Jesuit Mission and its nonprofit affiliates. In March 2016, an iSchool delegation traveled to Chiapas to assess the radio station and library and offered recommendations for community engagement and collection management. (iSchool Capstone, 2016 a,b) In the Tzeltal language there is no word for library; it is called “Snahul stsabojob sp’ijjal sjol yo’tan jlumaltic,” roughly translated as “the house of wisdom or knowledge from the heart of our land.” The name of the library is important as it maintains the Tzeltal identity, but more important is the way in which it organizes its information, supporting the Tzeltal indigenous worldview and local knowledge. Conventional classification systems are meaningless, limiting organization and access to indigenous language materials. (Littletree & Metoyer, 2015)

![Figure 1. Indigenous Community Radio Station (left) and Library (right) in Bachajon, Chiapas.](image)

Complementing the library and community radio, we are developing a monitoring and evaluation system to systematically collect evidence of impact of these information activities and other community development initiatives of the Tzeltal people. The collection of stories, photos and demographic information in a structured and systematic way using the Community Wellness Outcomes toolkit (Gomez & Yim, 2016; Gomez et.al. 2014; Gomez et.al. 2013), is a process that informs the monitoring and evaluation initiative. Building the information practices of the library, community radio, and impact assessment, in the logic of the Cargo system of community service and in support of the Tzeltal world view of “Good Living” (“el buen vivir”) are the cornerstones of the integrated information system for the Tzeltal community.

2 Cargos and the Good Life: A Map for a Tzeltal Information System

The Tzeltal cargo system of Cargos, and their indigenous vision of what “Good Living” means are the engines behind the organization and classification system of the library, and will provide the organizing principles for the community radio programming. They are both key features of the harmony and function of Tzeltal indigenous communities. Cargos are community leaders named by their communities because they display personal integrity, strength of character, and a particular set of talents or skills needed by the community. Their communities ask them to serve, uncompensated, Undertaking the role and responsibilities of a Cargo is considered honorable. Cargos attend regular meetings and participate in training and planning events in the village, community and region. They are expected to share what they learn with their communities. The distribution of Cargos according to themes or categories is critical to understanding the organization of information: some are focused on “spiritual” (religious, ecclesial, ritual) matters, and others on “civil” (administrative, legal, rights, health, agricultural production) matters, though these distinctions

623
are ours. For Tzeltales, spiritual life permeates all aspects of community life. (One Equal Heart, 2016a). The Cargo system is key to the Tzeltal indigenous information system, library, and to the monitoring and evaluation system. All community radio activities and programming can be best performed by Cargos nominated by the communities to serve in this role; we can then help get them the tools and training they need to produce radio programs based on the life of their communities. Cargos can serve in more than one role at the same time, and helping collect and distribute materials from the indigenous library, or gathering evidence of impact of the development activities, can also lead to materials for community radio programming.

The notion of “Good Living,” not to be confused with leisure or material wealth, is the second pillar of the indigenous information system. It is an indigenous vision of sustainability that takes into account a community’s physical, environmental, social and spiritual health, and acknowledges and embraces our reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth (One Equal Heart, 2016b). The concept of “el buen vivir” moves beyond traditional definitions of development, progress and prosperity, which are measured along material or consumptive improvements. Instead it advocates for holistic and environmentally-rooted systems that seek balance in economic, political, sociocultural and environmental factors. Together these factors contribute to opportunities for individuals to experience “living well.” In the Tzeltal tradition, sustainable development is “el buen vivir” and cannot exist without harmony. Harmony is achieved by honoring the reciprocal nature of relationships between human beings and with God, who is the Heart of the Heavens and the Heart of the Earth. The heart must take in knowledge and information to see if it will advance or disrupt harmony. This is why the “thinking with the heart” requires new approaches to building an indigenous information system that integrates community radio, a library and impact assessment for community development.

3 Conclusion

The integrated information and evaluation system for indigenous development with Tzeltal communities in Chiapas, Mexico, builds on the system of Cargos, and supports the notion of “the Good Living.” Six themes for “Good Living” are proposed to inform the organization and classification system of the library, the programming of the community radio, and the focus of the data collection for impact evaluation:

- Food Security: Agro-ecology and Social Entrepreneurship;
- Health: Traditional Medicine and Child and Family Nutrition
- Community Justice: Human Rights and Social Movements
- Culture: History and Tzeltal Systems of Knowledge
- Spirituality: Mayan Spiritual Traditions and the Autochthonous Church
- Gender: Women’s rights and Prevention of Violence against Women

These themes reflect the multi-dimensional indigenous vision for “Good Living” Each represents an area of focus within the existing Cargo system. Together they inform the integrated information system that combines the community radio, library, and impact assessment. This indigenous information system uses new technologies and tools to help strengthen and promote the Tzeltal indigenous worldview, culture and rights.

Our work builds upon current literature on library services to indigenous populations to achieve a deeper understanding for how to effectively establish systems for knowledge creation, management and sharing in an indigenous context. Existing scholarly literature explores the Tzeltal Maya way of life through a sociological and anthropological lens, and less from the library and information science perspective. With our work, we aim to build capacity within the Tzeltal community to organize, share and manage information in their own language to benefit the entire region. We also hope our research will lead to further research, not just within the Tzeltal communities, but also within other indigenous populations that can build on our
research to adapt similar forms of knowledge organization and an integrated information and evaluation systems.

4 References


