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Farmer Movement Oversight and Government Agriculture Programs in Mexico

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https://accountabilityresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Fertilizante_en_Tiempos_de_la_4T.pdf

Cover photo: Taking decisions during a session of the *Coordinadora de Comisariados de Guerrero*.

Credit: Carlos García Jiménez

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The interpretation of the facts, the analysis of official information, and the conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Summary

In Mexico's state of Guerrero, a broad-based, collaborative social accountability campaign led by a network of agrarian community leaders contributed to improving a large-scale free fertilizer program, targeted at smallholders.

In 2019, the newly-elected federal government took over a state government subsidy program that had been synonymous with clientelism and corruption, promising to clean it up and include access to organic fertilizer. When the program's historic deficiencies persisted during its first year of transition to federal management, farmers responded with widespread, confrontational protest.

To address this chaotic situation, veteran activists and community leaders from across the state transformed protest into proposals, launching a participatory, statewide monitoring and advocacy campaign with the Guerrero Network of Ejido and Communal Commissioners.

The campaign advocated for the validation of program beneficiary rosters in community assemblies, based on federal agrarian law, also using the official public information request system. It helped to ensure the distribution of fertilizer to smallholder farmers, reduced diversion of fertilizer for corrupt or electoral purposes, and promoted more inclusion of women and indigenous smallholders.

Despite these achievements, the Network's proposals for transparency, peasant participation, accountability, and agroecological transition were rejected by the government officials responsible for the fertilizer program. In response, the campaign coordinators shifted their focus to other government agricultural programs and coordinated with agrarian leaders in other states to launch their own advocacy platforms.

This organizing process led to the second *Campesino* Convention of Guerrero, which included participation of agrarian leaders from a dozen other states, followed by regional meetings and state conventions in half of the country's states. On April 10, 2023, five thousand agrarian leaders gathered in Mexico City for the First National *Agrarista* Convention.

Reflections on this experience include:

- The focus of the farmer oversight campaign on immediately felt needs generated social energy and inspired a new organizing strategy.
- The state-wide mobilization to promote better fertilizer delivery was grounded in revitalized civic life in historic local participatory governance institutions that were created following the Mexican Revolution. Elected leaders of these *ejidos* and agrarian communities gave the campaign both scale and legitimacy.
- Though mainly driven by grassroots organizing, the farmer oversight campaign also used technical open government tools.
- The campaign combined the monitoring of agricultural programs and local problem-solving with social mobilization, scaling up advocacy for greater recognition of peasant movement oversight to the national level.

Introduction

The Mexican government is seeking national food sovereignty, with a combination of production subsidies, crop support prices, trade policies, and phased-in bans on a leading herbicide and GMO white corn. When President López Obrador's government came into office in 2018, it cleared the decks in the countryside by eliminating a wide range of inherited agricultural programs—both expensive marketing subsidies for large commercial growers and numerous smaller, discretionary programs widely seen as high corruption risks. The government then invested in a large new agroforestry program and expanded coverage of a longstanding crop payment program that had originated as compensation for farmers having to compete with subsidized US grain imports under the North American Free Trade Agreement, targeting it much more to small-scale producers. This policy package also included a growing emphasis on free fertilizer for smallholders, scaling up a longstanding state-level program.

In the state of Guerrero, the federal government took over a state government subsidy program that had been synonymous with clientelism and corruption, promising to clean it up and include access to organic fertilizer. The program had reached many more smallholders than any other in the state, but its first year under federal management did not deliver. Angry farmers responded with widespread, confrontational protest.

In response to this turmoil, Guerrero peasant movement veterans and community leaders created a constructive alternative by building a broad-based grassroots oversight network to encourage the government to put into practice its promises of more benefits for the poor, with less corruption. This organizing strategy followed a new path by revitalizing preexisting local agrarian governance institutions called *ejidos* and agrarian communities. In contrast to the previous two decades of peasant organizing in Mexico, which had mainly involved either autonomous producer organizations or partisan political machines dependent on government funding, Guerrero's new network was grounded in the legacy of the agrarian reform that followed the 1910–1917 revolution. Nationwide, this legacy includes more than 32,000 elected *ejidos* and agrarian communities, which hold title to just over half of Mexico's land.¹ In the state of Guerrero, with its especially vibrant history of peasant organizing, *ejidos* and agrarian communities are guardians and titleholders of 77 percent of the land.

The Guerrero Network of Ejido and Communal Commissioners (*Coordinadora de Comisariados Ejidales y Comunales de Guerrero*) includes local leaders elected for three-year terms in officially-recognized agrarian assemblies. The new network combined grassroots organizing, statewide convening, and multi-level monitoring of rural programs, with policy advocacy to improve the government's delivery of agricultural support services.

The Guerrero network is broad-based but decentralized, drawing on the Mexican social movement tradition of 'coordinated networks' (*coordinadoras*). The network is also autonomous—which in the Mexican context means it is not controlled by political parties or government officials. Organizers called their policy monitoring and problem-solving efforts *contraloría campesina* (peasant oversight). This new name for peasant movement oversight of government services appropriated and transformed an official name for community-based monitoring of projects—'*contraloría social*'—a government term dating back to the early 1990s and watered down since then.²

Under this rubric of peasant oversight, Guerrero's new grassroots monitoring and advocacy network organized for practical problem-solving with a civic revitalization of Mexico's grassroots agrarian governance institutions. The network's second statewide agrarian convention, held in 2021, brought together elected leaders from 650 of the state's 1,255 *ejidos* and agrarian communities and inspired organizing efforts in other states. Following 13 state conventions, organizers convened a first national *agrarista* convention in Mexico City. This unprecedented gathering

drew 5,000 agrarian leaders from 23 states, who called for an action plan to “rescue and transform” the Mexican countryside. This was one of Mexico’s most broad-based peasant movement convenings in recent years.

In the early 1990s, a president widely seen as fraudulently elected had declared the agrarian reform over, legalized the privatization of *ejido* land, and opened up the agricultural sector to US imports.³ At the time, most analysts and activists assumed that *ejidos* and agrarian communities had become irrelevant relics. Yet Guerrero’s recent *Coordinadora* experience suggests that their death was announced prematurely.

The Dark Legacy of Subsidized Fertilizer in Guerrero

In 2018, Mexico’s ‘Fourth Transformation’ government was elected in a landslide vote. Diverse rural social organizations participated in the campaign, building on the previous decade’s electoral mobilizations under the umbrella of the 21st Century ‘Plan de Ayala’ Peasant Movement (*Movimiento Campesino ‘Plan de Ayala’ Siglo XXI*). This platform updated a discourse that recalled the promises of the Mexican Revolution and the original Zapatista land rights movement.⁴

Activists in Guerrero could call on deeply embedded memories of past waves of social protest and pro-democracy movements that had swept the state every decade or two, going back for a century, in the face of reprisals from corrupt political machines and armed actors.⁵ These memories are alive in the recent history of Guerrero’s peasant movement. The Guerrero state government’s combination of carrots and sticks⁶ had included a large-scale fertilizer subsidy program that was notorious for its systemic clientelism and corruption.⁷ The program was launched in 1994 by a governor who later resigned after being implicated in the 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre, when a contingent of peasants on their way to a protest were ambushed and murdered by the state police, while officials flew in a helicopter overhead.

After the 2018 election, new president López Obrador responded to this dark legacy by bringing the fertilizer program under federal control as Fertilizer for Welfare and promising that it would benefit all peasants and include organic fertilizer.⁸ Yet managing the program’s 2019 transition to federal control proved very challenging—the government’s improvised approach excluded many smallholders and either delivered fertilizer too late in the season to be useful, or not at all. The program’s few alternatives to chemical fertilizer were erratic and ineffective. Plus, the incoming government gave the job of fertilizer distribution to a new agricultural agency, *Segalmex*, that turned out to be very corrupt in its first two years.⁹

The delivery problems led to chaos, as angry farmers took over warehouses and trucks, blocked highways, and detained government officials. After all, the state’s unofficial nickname is *Guerrero bronco*—angry Guerrero.¹⁰

From Protest to Proposal

In 2020, veteran activists from the autonomous peasant movement responded to the tumultuous federalization of the program by leading a transition ‘from protest to proposal.’ Many of these organizers had spent years building autonomous regional producer and consumer organizations, trying to find cracks in the dominant system and build statewide networks to advocate for more open, participatory, and pro-peasant rural development policy.¹¹

After the 2018 election, Guerrero rural activists transitioned from promoting a free and secret ballot to convening community consultation assemblies to share their proposals for planning the new government. With the declared goal of bypassing “intermediaries,” the new government social programs relied instead on their own new cadre of official outreach workers, called Servers of the Nation. Activists pivoted again, convening a statewide convention at the end of 2019 that drew 1000 delegates, including elected leaders of more than 400 *ejidos* and agrarian communities, where they launched a new declaration calling for “the pacification of rural territories and the rescue of agriculture in Guerrero.”¹² Guerrero became one of the few states in Mexico where the peasant movement sustained momentum after the election and transformed itself into an initiative to hold the new government accountable for its campaign promises. The *Coordinadora* in Guerrero became one of the only autonomous statewide peasant movement networks sustaining advocacy work, while in the rest of the country most peasant organizations were on the defensive, or in survival mode.

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By the second year of the federal version of the Fertilizer for Welfare Program, the Guerrero peasant movement oversight initiative was calling for public dissemination of the program’s rules of operation, monitoring delivery to farmers, assessing results, and making proposals for improvement, contributing to a more effective and much less tumultuous distribution process. Their campaign to oversee program implementation from below relied on elected agrarian community leaders who had a high degree of local legitimacy and legal recognition. The independent monitoring strategy emphasized community validation assemblies, which reviewed official lists of program beneficiaries in an effort to ensure that they only included actual producers. The assembly-based oversight strategy was backed by officials from other federal land tenure agencies—the National Agrarian Registry and Agrarian Attorney’s office. They were responsive to peasant communities and acted as counterweights to the officials of the Secretariat of Agriculture and Rural Development (*Secretaría de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural, SADER*), who were less open to accepting the peasant movement’s proposals or oversight. These assemblies reduced corruption and improved the program’s targeting of low-income producers who actually grew corn, often delivering enough fertilizer to cover two hectares of rainfed crops. These watchdog efforts both cleaned up the roster of beneficiaries and helped low-income farmers—including many who lacked access to other government programs—to overcome bureaucratic obstacles.

Figure 1. Fertilizer Distribution in Guerrero



Fertilizer being distributed to campesinos under the Fertilizer for Welfare Program.

Credit: Archivo de la Coordinadora de Comisariados.

The *Coordinadora's* oversight strategy also deployed targeted transparency for accountability. This involved dissemination of key information to farmers, such as the program's operating regulations, lists of beneficiaries, and locations of distribution centers. The *Contraloría Campesina* also obtained relevant information on the program by filing data requests through the official public information access system, as well as using the government's policy evaluations and audits to provide independent evidence of problems with implementation of the Fertilizer for Welfare Program.¹³

Yet the leverage of Guerrero's peasant movement monitoring and advocacy was limited to local problem-solving involving producer access and program operations. The *Coordinadora's* proposals for overcoming the structural deficiencies of the program were not considered by SADER because this would imply recognizing the deficiencies pointed out by the peasant movement oversight and granting a more active role to the *Coordinadora*. Although the *Coordinadora* never proposed participating in the Fertilizer for Welfare Program's operations, nor receiving resources, SADER officials argued that the government's public policy was to stop subsidizing producers' organizations or social enterprises.

Indeed, in the name of anti-corruption and bypassing intermediaries, one of the government's first decisions was to eliminate its funding for peasant organizations. Many welcomed the further weakening of traditional rural political machines, but the same policy decision also cut off autonomous social enterprises, which had managed to gain modest degrees of access to government support off and on over the years. The government's policy strategy focused exclusively on delivering subsidies to individuals, rather than providing public goods for agriculture or investment in organized producers. This experience in Guerrero shows how, in practice, national policy went further than ending funding for producer organizations, by also excluding them from participation in policy design and program oversight.

Advocacy to Improve the Fertilizer for Welfare Program

In 2020, the new federal program's second season, the peasant oversight process managed to help 50,000 producers get access to the program, which reached 340,000 in total (DeTura and García Jiménez 2021). Plus, most of the fertilizer was distributed *before* planting time. This initial traction encouraged the *Coordinadora* to develop a package of 15 specific proposals to improve the fertilizer program's operating regulations for the 2021 season—such as including beneficiary committees in the oversight of delivery operations; more coordination among government agencies; soil studies to inform the appropriate fertilizer to apply; keeping political parties out of the distribution process; firing specific corrupt officials; including organic fertilizer options, local seed, and support to establish 'biofactories' to produce agroecological inputs; and participatory technical support to support transitions from agrochemical dependence to agroecological production.¹⁴

SADER officials rejected all the proposals. The government's only concession was to agree to allocate three percent of its proposed 2021 budget in the state to "agroecological innovations"—though it eventually diverted those funds to "other priorities." The following year, in the Fertilizer for Welfare Program's 2022 operating regulations, SADER returned to its previous position of avoiding any specific agroecological commitments. A strongly pro-agroecology national Secretary of the Environment publicly declared his frustration with agricultural policy's emphasis on agrochemicals, and he left office after less than a year.¹⁵

Figure 2. Agroecological Technical School



Campeños participate in an Agroecological Technical School organized under the Producción para el Bienestar program.

Credit: Carlos García Jiménez

Fertilizer for Welfare Program Coverage Grows

In the next crop cycles, SADER continued to expand its distribution of free chemical fertilizer to smallholders to cover up to two hectares, both within Guerrero and in other states. The program reached a much larger share of smallholders in Guerrero than in any other state. It also reached more producers than any other government agricultural program in Guerrero. Another national SADER program, *Producción para el Bienestar* (Production for Welfare), formerly known as Procampo, had the second-broadest reach and covered less than half as many producers (150,000).¹⁶ The national Social Welfare Department's high-profile *Sembrando Vida* (Sowing Life) agroforestry program received more total funding but reached only 39,000 producers.

Most remarkable about the Fertilizer for Welfare Program's broad coverage in Guerrero is that, according to official data for 2021, 46 percent of beneficiaries were women, 29 percent were indigenous, and 67 percent were in the state's three lowest-income regions.¹⁷ Though women represent an increasing share of *ejido* title-holders nation-wide (27 percent across Mexico and 37 percent in Guerrero), to represent close to half of the state's Fertilizer for Welfare Program recipients was a remarkable shift (possibly related to high rates of male out-migration).¹⁸ By 2022, SADER had also improved its public disclosure of Fertilizer for Welfare Program information, publishing data that identifies specific bottlenecks for producer access to the roster.¹⁹

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Figure 3. Women as Agrarian Reform Title Holders



An indigenous woman shares her proposals in a workshop to build awareness of women's rights as agrarian title-holders, Costa Chica region.

Credit: Promotores de la Autogestión para el Desarrollo Social.

Meanwhile, in 2020 and 2021, Fertilizer for Welfare Program coverage expanded, reaching more than 800,000 beneficiaries in nine states by 2022—including almost a quarter million smallholders in Chiapas and over 150,000 in Oaxaca, primarily in indigenous localities.²⁰ The program continues to emphasize the state of Guerrero, with more than 38 per cent of the national budget allocation in 2022 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Fertilizer for Welfare Program: Indicators of Coverage (projected for 2022)

	Program beneficiaries as a share of producers in the state (%)	State share of national program budget (%)	Share of arable land in each state covered by the program (%)
Chiapas	20.1	23.4	22
Durango	0.5	0.6	2
Guerrero	43.5	38.8	71
Morelos	0.7	0.8	7
Nayarit	2.9	2.3	10
Oaxaca	24.0	25.9	36
Puebla	3.9	3.5	5
Tlaxcala	3.4	3.6	21
Zacatecas	1.0	1.1	2

Source: SADER/INCA RURAL 2022: 59-60

The free fertilizer is a standard package of urea and nitrogen-phosphorus for up to two rainfed hectares, with no variation to adapt to diverse soil conditions.²¹ Plus, the program’s expansion to other states has encountered delivery challenges. One SADER official observed: “This year (2023) fertilizer delivery has been on time only in the State of Mexico, the planting season has begun, and it won’t be useful for most producers if they get it late.”²²

The rapid expansion of program coverage to other states was not accompanied by promotion of the program's official social oversight process (*contraloría social*). While recent program documents refer to the goal of promoting official social oversight committees, grievance mechanisms, and information request systems, there is no evidence that the program encourages these reforms in Guerrero.²³ The most recent program evaluation describes in detail the official processes for operating the social oversight committees but concludes that in practice they were still "incipient" in 2022—citing only one in existence. The evaluation recognizes that social oversight programs are "extremely necessary" in order to "provide community and social monitoring of the use of the program support and also to provide information to the population that does not benefit from the program, who might question why some producers benefit while others do not." According to the evaluation, "since [participating in social oversight] is not obligatory for the beneficiaries, more promotion is needed to communicate the importance of strengthening the operation of the program at the territorial level. This would permit greater transparency, would help to monitor delivery of the support to the actual target population, and would verify that the producers make good use of the input." The report finds: "there is no strategy nor incentives to increase [producers'] participation."²⁴ A SADER policymaker shared a similar assessment, recognizing that the expanded federal Fertilizer for Welfare Program "maintains many of the vices of the previous state program and also generates others: a) there are insufficient inputs to cover all the smallholders and all their plots; b) generates pressure from excluded peasants and new efforts to get access; and c) encourages the sale of fertilizer by recipients who don't farm."²⁵

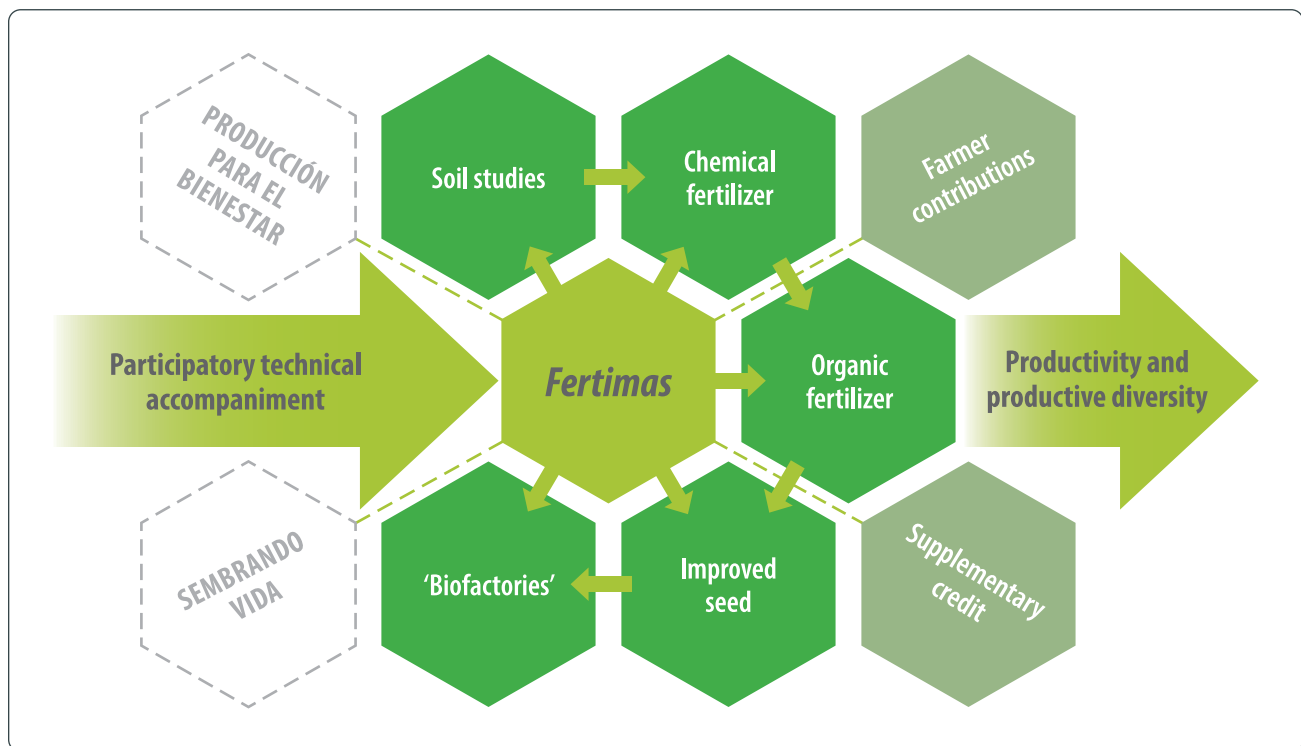
Both the official SADER evaluation and the Guerrero peasant movement oversight found that the Fertilizer for Welfare Program distributes chemical fertilizers with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. In practice, availability from the industrial provider determined the specific combination of fertilizers delivered.²⁶ At the same time, a different branch of the same agriculture ministry, the Undersecretariat of Food Self-Sufficiency, promoted agroecological training and the use of 'biofertilizers', within the ministry's second-largest subsidy program, *Producción para el Bienestar*.²⁷ This Under-Secretary—a veteran advocate for small farmers—also promoted new policies that banned both the widely-used commercial herbicide glyphosate and imports of GMO white corn. Very different visions of agricultural policy coexist within the Fourth Transformation government.

Back in Guerrero, the *Coordinadora* adapted to SADER's lack of responsiveness to its proposals for improving the Fertilizer for Welfare Program by broadening its focus to engage with other agricultural programs, gaining a modest degree of traction. The *Sembrando Vida* program began to extend its coverage to new regions of the state, listening to *ejido* commissioners. SADER's national crop purchasing agency began to locate procurement centers in areas of surplus production in the state, as the *Coordinadora* had proposed. The agroecological technical accompaniment initiative within the *Producción para el Bienestar* program collaborated with *ejido* commissioners, increasing its field presence to reach half the state's municipalities, part of a national expansion process that involved 1,200 agroecology promoters nationwide by 2023.

Yet from the point of view of Guerrero peasant movement advocates, government support for agroecological approaches in the state continued to be small-scale. It is difficult for agroecological approaches to compete with the large-scale distribution of free chemical fertilizer.

In response, the Coordinadora developed another proposal to reorient the Fertilizer for Welfare Program to rationalize the use of chemical inputs, combined with gradual introduction of agroecological inputs, cultivation, and soil management practices. They called their proposed alternative *Fertimas* (the name suggests ‘more than fertilizer’). Its goal is soil regeneration and reduced dependence on chemical fertilizers. Its key elements for promoting agroecological transitions (see Figure 4) include: soil studies, place-specific chemical fertilizer packages determined by the soil studies (targeted to producers without eroded and weak soils), an agroecological input package (by producer request, of a value equivalent to the chemical fertilizer package), improved seeds (of national and native origin), biofactories for agroecological inputs (produced by experienced *campesino* organizations), all supported by sustained, agroecological technical accompaniment, trained in the participatory ‘farmer-to-farmer’ (*campesino a campesino*) method.²⁸

Figure 4. ‘Fertimas’: An Alternative Approach to Fertilizer Programming



Credit: Coordinadora de Comisariados de Guerrero

Statewide Agrarian Movement-Building and Beyond

The Coordinadora's agenda went beyond local problem-solving and proposals for improving existing government programs. At the end of 2021, it convened its second statewide Campesino Convention, bringing together more than 1,400 farmers, including elected commissioners from 650 of the 1,255 *ejidos* and agrarian communities in the state—as well as participants from 12 other states (Figure 5).²⁹ In contrast to the conventional practice with large peasant movement gatherings, this statewide convening received no government funding, apart from a small town municipal government that hosted and provided facilities. The convention focused on developing a statewide, pro-peasant policy agenda that proposed a new 'agrarianism,' with a comprehensive development strategy and grassroots governance.

Figure 5. The Second Guerrero Campesino Convention



Plenary session of the Second Guerrero Campesino Convention brought together 1,400 farmers from across Guerrero and 12 other states, 2021.

Credit: Archivo de la Coordinadora de Comisariados.

The Guerrero convention's organizing model was replicated in a dozen other states, building to a National *Agrarista* Convention in 2023. Their adoption of the historic Mexican political term *agrarista* recognizes the activists who risked their lives to carry out large-scale agrarian reform in the early 20th century. It is no coincidence that this national gathering was held on the 104th anniversary of the government assassination of iconic revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. The autonomous Mexican peasant movement has long commemorated April 10 to recall both the hopes raised by Zapata's program of "land and freedom," and their sense of frustration with the broken promises of the post-revolutionary governments. Remarkably, around 5000 *ejido* leaders from 23 states covered their own costs to travel across the country for the day-long rally—too many for organizers to keep track of. This was one of the largest autonomous Mexican peasant movement gatherings during the Fourth Transformation government.

The convention's national *Agrarista* Manifesto called for strengthening agrarian law and institutions (including gender equity, for land titles to be considered family property), recognition of indigenous rights, participatory democracy, peasant movement oversight, support for social enterprises, sustainable natural resource management and building 'territories of peace' in zones overrun by crime. While the participants sought recognition and commitment from senior federal officials, asserting their alignment with the governing Fourth Transformation agenda, they also proposed a different approach to rural governance: "government with the people, from the people, and for the people."³⁰

Reflections for Participation, Transparency, and Accountability

- **This autonomous grassroots mobilization revitalized historic local participatory governance institutions, a legacy of the Mexican Revolution.** Guerrero's historic community-based official agrarian reform institutions continue to operate, despite very little governmental support for decades. Though widely seen as moribund—or as tools of control from above—elected leaders of the state's *ejidos* and agrarian communities came together to respond to the 2019 crisis in the delivery of the Fertilizer for Welfare Program, and to propose solutions to the government. Their problem-solving strategy emphasized the review of official subsidy program beneficiary rosters, to call for the inclusion of excluded smallholders. Hundreds of public assemblies were legally validated by allied government land registration agencies, offsetting unresponsive agricultural department officials. In comparative context, this large-scale effort to activate official local assemblies for public oversight is closer to India's independent social audits than to the donor-funded NGO projects and academic field experiments that dominate the international literature on social accountability.³¹ These assemblies enabled community voices to call on government officials to reduce diversion of subsidies to non-farmers. The community rosters also broadened the program's inclusion of actual farmers, significantly increasing access for women and indigenous producers.
- **The farmer oversight campaign's focus on immediately felt needs generated social energy for mobilization.** The movement's oversight strategy followed both an energetic presidential election whose leader made ambitious commitments to farmers and a wave of protest against a chaotic policy shift. Local agrarian leaders responded to this contrast by focusing farmer attention on improving a government program that embodied a strongly felt need, decades of entitlement—and the prospect of locally visible results in the form of actual delivery of fertilizer to genuine small farmers. Indeed, the government's policy emphasis on individualized subsidies created opportunities for diversion that could only be mitigated by the community-level eyes and ears. While economists would call free bags of fertilizer a private good, the farmer movement oversight strategy used community interest in the program to turn transparency, participation, and accountability into a public good. So far, however, the government's large-scale expansion of the free chemical fertilizer distribution in other states has not been accompanied by replication of large-scale farmer movement oversight.

“While economists would call free bags of fertilizer a private good, the farmer movement oversight strategy used community interest in the program to turn transparency, participation, and accountability into a public good.”
- **Networking among ‘legacy’ community agrarian institutions provided both broad scale and public legitimacy to the grassroots movement for public oversight.** Grassroots organizers managed to socially reactivate *ejidos*, grounded in agrarian law. This campaign's movement-led approach to adapting official local agrarian institutions for participatory oversight of government agencies was new in Mexico. Though the capacity of *ejidos* has eroded—lacking basic infrastructure and external support—and they are challenged by organized crime and an aging membership, this experience shows that Guerrero's *ejidos* retain two kinds of legitimacy. First, their longstanding tradition of regular, institutionalized membership assemblies, internal oversight committees, and leadership elections (with no reelection), rests on participation by the rank-and-file membership. Second, the legal requirement that their assemblies be officially validated by government land tenure authorities made it more difficult for agricultural officials to ignore them completely.

- **In a state where a legacy of unresponsive governments produced a long history of confrontational protest, farmer movement efforts at collaborative social accountability still found few willing partners in the government Fertilizer for Welfare Program.** Senior government agricultural officials' responses to the farmer movement's attempts to partner to improve program performance ranged from inconsistent to nonexistent. In response, the network of agrarian community leaders shifted terrain, redirecting their collaborative social accountability efforts to focus on other government agricultural programs and pursuing a more diversified, medium-term movement-building strategy. Their new, long-term policy proposal to reform the Fertilizer for Welfare Program, called *Fertimas*, called for shifting the focus of the subsidy from chemical fertilizer to investment in soil health.
- **Though mainly driven by grassroots organizing, the farmer oversight campaign also drew on technical governance tools, drawing on decades of experience with institutional reforms.** Campaign advisors drew on their extensive past experience with using national government transparency and accountability reforms to inform their community-based monitoring and advocacy work. These past national laws required that social programs publish specific rules of operations to inform who can gain access and how, as well as public disclosure of rosters of beneficiaries. Relevant national reforms also included a national public information access agency that responds to citizen data requests (INAI), an evaluation agency that publishes reviews of social programs (CONEVAL), as well as a supreme audit institution that reports annually to congress (ASF). In Guerrero, organizers' past experience with accessing and interpreting often hard-to-find official data allowed campaigners to complement the community level verification of beneficiary rosters. Organizers had learned that the devil is in the (often opaque) details.
- **Government officials used official anti-corruption policy discourse to exclude representatives of producers from collaborative social accountability.** In the Mexican context, 'intermediaries' have a bad reputation—associated with political machines that manipulated the weak and diverted public resources. The government's one-size-fits-all elimination of funding for intermediaries proved to be a two-edged sword, preventing leakage but also rolling back past reforms that supported social enterprises and nonprofit services (such as coffee grower cooperatives and shelters for women survivors of domestic violence). The idea of intermediary was used broadly, to include social organizations that represented their members as well as those that operated clientelist machines. This contradictory effect is widely recognized in Mexico, yet the Guerrero experience reveals an additional perverse effect of this anti-corruption strategy. Government officials used the same argument against funding intermediaries to reject collaboration with elected, representative leaders of agrarian communities to improve program design and operation.
- **This farmer campaign combined local level oversight and problem-solving with state and national level policy engagement.** The strategy pursued a multi-level approach, coordinating its local problem-solving with policy advocacy at state and national levels. Those efforts led to some one-off responses, yet more responsive or accountable governance did not follow. Yet these challenges—and the movement-building strategy grounded in revitalized *ejidos*—managed to find a remarkable degree of resonance beyond Guerrero. Thousands of elected agrarian community leaders came together in Mexico City in an effort to shift the peasant movement's terrain from local problem-solving to national agenda-setting.

Notes

- 1 For official agrarian data, see: <http://www.ran.gob.mx/ran/index.php/sistemas-de-consulta/estadistica-agraria>. *Ejidos* and agrarian communities are widely seen to have major problems with governance and representation, in spite of their numerous mechanisms to encourage their accountability to titleholders such as vesting authority in public assemblies, elected rotating leadership (now with gender parity), as well as elected internal oversight committees. However, in recent decades research has addressed laws and census data more than broad trends in how these agrarian governance institutions function in practice. For a state-level analysis of *ejido* responses to the national reform of agrarian law, see Torres Mazuera (2014). For a recent overview of the official *ejido* governance structure, see CEDRSSA (2021). For an analysis of provisions of the 1992 agrarian law, see for example, Pérez Castañeda and MacKinlay (2015). On *ejido* censuses over time, see Romero Navarrete (2015).
- 2 The term ‘community oversight’ is also used in Guerrero (García Jiménez and Barreda (2010). For a multilingual discussion of different understandings of ‘accountability keywords,’ including ‘social oversight’ in Spanish, see <https://accountabilityresearch.org/accountability-keywords/>.
- 3 Though many predicted that NAFTA would depopulate the Mexican countryside, and rural employment was significantly affected, the size of the rural population has remained steady since then (Bada and Fox 2021) and white corn production grew, reaching national self-sufficiency (Fox and Haight 2010).
- 4 See García Jiménez (2020), MCPASXXII (2019), and Núñez Membrillo (2021).
- 5 See Bartra (1996) and Fox, García Jiménez, and Haight (2009).
- 6 In Guerrero, the phrase ‘*pan y palo*’ is used to describe a pattern of governance that combines material concessions (or promises) with repression of dissidents to keep authorities in power.
- 7 See Méndez Lara (2012).
- 8 President López Obrador launched the new federal program on February 2, 2019, with the words: “Guerrero will be the only state with free fertilizer, it’s just that we need to try for it to be organic fertilizer, fertilizer that doesn’t degrade the soil, to care for the environment” (cited in García Jiménez 2023: 16-17).
- 9 The reported value of missing funds reached more than US\$879 million. See Castillo García (2023).
- 10 See Bartra (1996).
- 11 On autonomous producer organizations in Guerrero, see Bartra (1996; 2000) and Fox, García Jiménez, and Haight (2009). For an overview, see Bartra (2014).
- 12 See: MCPASXXI (2019), García Jiménez (2019).
- 13 For example, the federal audit of the program in 2020 found “lack of mechanisms of control, supervision, and monitoring to assure that the fertilizer was delivered to the beneficiaries,” as well as large volumes of fertilizer that was either not delivered or delivered to beneficiaries not on the roster (ASF 2021: 8). The following year, the problems identified by the same federal audit institution were not as serious—possibly related to the more intensive ‘peasant oversight,’ though it did not find consistent criteria for meeting the program goal of targeting localities considered “high and very high marginality” (ASF 2022: 6). For an independent study of institutional corruption mechanisms in the Agriculture Department, focused on opaque programs eliminated by the current government, see Delalande (2019).
- 14 For detailed discussion of the peasant oversight process during this period, see DeTura and García Jiménez (2021).
- 15 See his comments to Enciso (2020). For subsequent observations, see Toledo (2023a; 2023b).
- 16 For analysis of Procampo, see Fox and Haight (2010).

17 See annual official data in García Jiménez (2023:60-61), based on official information requests. For additional official data reporting on Fertilizer for Welfare Program coverage other states, see SADER (2023a). Women farmers are also increasingly well-represented in the *Producción para el Bienestar* crop payment program, with 34 percent of recipients, up from 20 percent (Subsecretaría de Autosuficiencia Alimentaria 2023).

18 For a recent overview of women and *ejidos*, see Torres-Mazuera (2023). Official National Agrarian Register data also show that women also represent 21 percent of elected leadership positions, though based on only one third of communities reporting (17 percent of leadership in Guerrero). See <http://www.ran.gob.mx/ran/index.php/sistemas-de-consulta/estadistica-agraria/estadistica-con-perspectiva-de-genero> (data reported as of June, 2023). Though recent gender parity requirements have led to increased female representation in elected *ejido* leadership positions, very few women hold the presidency. In Guerrero, women were reported to be presidents of only 16 out of the state's 1255 *ejidos* and communities.

19 <https://www.gob.mx/agricultura/documentos/programa-fertilizantes-para-el-bienestar-2022-guerrero>

20 SADER (2023a)

21 Soil studies that inform the alignment of fertilizer doses with soil conditions can drive dramatic productivity increases, as shown by a rare, innovation pilot by the Mexican small and medium-sized grain producers in National Association of Marketing Enterprises (ANEC) (Rudiño 2011).

22 The official government evaluation confirmed that in 2022 “due to PEMEX not providing sufficient fertilizer on time, in some states such as Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala, fertilizer was not delivered to beneficiaries on time, since it came after the dates that were technically viable for application to the crops” (SADER/INCA RURAL 2023: 11). In contrast, the evaluation confirmed that program operations in Guerrero flowed much more effectively.

23 SADER (2023b).

24 SADER/INCA RURAL (2023: 14; 23; 144; 185).

25 Email correspondence, June 23, 2023.

26 SADER/INCA RURAL (2023: 209; 214).

27 For perspectives on that program's innovations, see Bartra et al. (2022). See also Toledo (2023a; 2023b). On Mexico's national grain self-sufficiency strategy, see Wise (2023).

28 On this agroecological pedagogy, see Holt-Giménez (2006).

29 For a full report, see CCECG (2022).

30 1ª Convención Agrarista (2023); Toledo (2023a).

31 For analyses of the international literature on social accountability, see Fox (2015) and Fischer-Mackey and Fox (2023).

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