



Coffee producers and NGO staff discuss producing organic honey as part of their diversification strategy.

## The transition process to ecological agriculture in Chiapas, Mexico

**Teresa Santiago and Max García**

The southern Mexican state of Chiapas is the country's largest producer of coffee. It is grown mostly by small scale farmers, with land holdings of 2 hectares or less, and more than 90 percent of the total production is exported to the United States and Europe. During the last two decades, more than 10 000 of these farmers have opted for organic production systems, and have since benefited from a better price for their coffee. The main motive for this transition has been the general belief that there is a large market "out there", willing to pay higher and more stable prices.

The change in production systems has taken place without any specific governmental support, and the State has not defined a particular policy related to organic agriculture. On the other hand, this change has been supported by the work of many NGOs who, for more than 30 years, have promoted alternatives to the intensive conventional agriculture predominating in the country, and to the market mechanisms associated with it. Their

work has been shaped by their interest in the local population's natural resource management and in their local knowledge.

### **Arte Natura**

One of these organisations is *Arte Natura*, a small Mexican NGO working in the region known as Meseta Comiteca, near the border with Guatemala. *Arte Natura* aims at strengthening the capacities of the local population towards sustainable development, providing specific advice and also organising training workshops and courses. As part of a broad programme, it promotes a low external input agriculture, with the aim of promoting local production, consumption and sale.

Having been working with many farmer organisations over the years, its staff was well aware that many farmers are interested in organic agriculture and the possibilities this brings, and that many of these organisations had effectively "become" organic. They also knew that the transition to an organic production system is not necessarily easy or straightforward, and that there are many more aspects than just trying to follow the organic production



standards, getting a certificate and selling the produce abroad. To improve and further develop its own extension and advisory work, *Arte Natura* did a small study in the state of Chiapas, trying to identify the most important aspects involved in the transition processes, and the attention each of these aspects received.

They selected 5 farmer organisations of different sizes, working in different regions of Chiapas. Three of them are coffee producers, one produces lychee (*Litchi chinensis*, fam. Sapindaceae) and the fifth makes use of the forest resources (timber production). Two of these organisations are relatively new, while farmers in the other three have been working together for almost eight years. Coffee production in the oldest organisation has been certified as organic for more than two years. And although these organisations are different, they have some common features: members are smallholders, and all of them belong to the Maya ethnic group. They all share a common interest: to earn a better price for their produce by being certified organic, and so improve their household's financial situation. Representatives of the five organisations expressed their interest in fulfilling the requirements for getting a certificate of organic production, and in actually getting it, as a necessary first step.

Research started in April 2004, with field visits, interviews and group discussions with farmers from the five organisations, and with staff from other NGOs who are supporting their work. *Arte Natura* also planned a meeting to present the preliminary observations and results to all those involved, hoping to get feedback.

### Unión de Productores Maya Vinic

This is one of the organisations selected for the study. Maya Vinic is a cooperative of small scale coffee producers from the districts of San Pedro Chenalhó, Pantelhó and Chalchihuitán. It was founded in July 1999, during a meeting organised to discuss the difficulties farmers face in selling their products. It builds on a local organisation founded a couple of years before, "Las Abejas", set up to defend the rights of the indigenous population in Chiapas.

Maya Vinic's mission is to get a fair price for its coffee, and they always work to ensure the coffee is of high quality. Organic production systems are "the way our forefathers did it". The cooperative also organises training courses, and is now interested in new activities, such as the production and commercialisation of organic honey.



During the following 18 months, farmers and extension workers willingly cooperated with this study, although in some cases it was not easy to get their opinions. Some farmers complained when they felt they were being evaluated, as if the study had been commissioned by a certification body to assess their progress or failures. Others were clearly unwilling to share the difficulties they experienced or the mistakes they might have made. At the same time, some extension workers expressed their dislike about discussing themes they feel are not their main field of expertise. In spite of these limitations, the discussions held and the subsequent analysis proved very interesting and valuable. It showed some common patterns, clearly reflecting that,

whatever the differences in the farmer organisations, their transition process to certified organic production involves some common factors.

### More than just technical aspects

All those interviewed mentioned the need to work on various technical aspects as an essential part of their transition to an organic production system. The first of these is the management of pests and diseases, considering the large impact these can have on production and productivity, and that under an organic system farmers cannot use the chemical products they have become used to relying on. Farmers and extension workers mentioned their interest in live barriers, which protect their plants against the wind, and also help to minimise the attack of the most common pests. They also highlighted the importance of further crop diversification, something directly related to an ecosystem's resilience. Representatives of all organisations also expressed their interest in reducing soil loss. This was seen with the use of cover crops, construction of terraces or contour ditches.

In general terms, all interviews showed a sincere concern for a more balanced system as a whole, and not just being concerned with the need to fulfil the criteria for obtaining an organic production certificate. But the analysis showed that farmer organisations also take other aspects into consideration, as the transition process involves a combination of ecological, social and economic elements.

### Organisational aspects

Of the five organisations surveyed, four regarded organisational aspects as being the most important issue, even more so than the need to improve or change technical production aspects. Looking back at their own transition process, organising themselves was the first step in all cases. The need for farmers to work together is due to the size of their farms. As smallholders, only small quantities are produced individually, while traders prefer to work with bigger volumes. Fortunately, farmers are used to working together, and to being part of a larger entity: in Chiapas, as in Mexico in general, there are many different local organisations in every village, with farmers working together for many different reasons.

The analysis, however, also showed that many of the existing farmer organisations are not large enough to be economically efficient, and thus encounter the same difficulties as individual producers. The need to get together with other organisations can easily result in them being "absorbed" by a larger organisation, thus losing their independence and autonomy. In addition, small organisations coming together or coordinating their activities has also led to the formation of a bureaucratic entity in charge of the coordination itself, with the risk of generating an elite group of farmers or leaders with access to information and with greater opportunities to present their ideas or interests.

### Commercialisation

This aspect relates to marketing and trade. This seemed particularly relevant, as all five organisations aim at selling their produce at a higher price or to a more steady (and thus "safer") market. But the survey showed that these points, although relevant, are not the top priority for farmers or their organisations. Three organisations considered this as the least important aspect, while the other two ranked it as next-to-last.

One of the explanations given is that Chiapas is already known worldwide for the production of organic coffee, and thus their produce is well received by those in the Northern markets willing to pay a higher price. But discussions with the different

stakeholders showed that the picture is not so simple, and that a lot of effort is required to get the products to these markets. This inevitably means that farmers need to obtain a certificate of organic production, and then form part of the organic commercialisation chain. The problem is that farmers in Chiapas constitute only a small group of actors within this chain, and that any new farmer organisation has to compete with many others, and establish the necessary links. At the same time, the fact that most of the production is sold on international markets, disregards the importance and possibilities of selling in the local market. When looking at food security and self sufficiency, efforts at promoting the domestic consumption of local products face many difficulties.

### Finance

Farmers and extension workers gave different answers as to the importance of this aspect, although all agreed that, together with commercialisation, this has been one of the aspects receiving least attention.

All farmers, regardless of the crop and of their farming technique, mention the importance of having access to loans or credit. As in most other regions and countries, farmers in Chiapas have many difficulties getting loans or credit. But farmers in the organisations surveyed mentioned that this is even harder for them, as banks or finance entities consider organic crops to be an even more risky enterprise than usual, as they are more likely to suffer losses through pest and disease attack. They also consider that farmers have fewer tools to fight this with, so production is not "guaranteed". More than showing that this is not important, the fact that this aspect is low on every farmer organisation's priority list just shows how difficult it is for them to do anything about it.

### Relationship with others

One of the most common observations mentioned in relation to the transition process is that it takes place in virtual isolation. Farmers interested in modifying their production systems generally do so without referring to any previous experience, without analysing previous cases, or without knowing what happened to those farmers who went through the same process before them. This was seen to show that farmer organisations and supporting NGOs give little importance to analysing an experience, and to sharing their learnings with others. It also highlights the general communication difficulties which the rural areas face.

But the analysis also showed some weaknesses in the relationships established between the farmers and the NGOs. In spite of the strategies followed by most NGOs, extension and advisory work is not necessarily participatory. Extension workers recognise that farmers' knowledge is valuable, but seem to consider it being at a lower level than the knowledge "brought from outside" by the NGOs. Consciously or not, farmers assume a passive role themselves, as if expecting to be told what they need to know. The development of an extension programme, as a result, depends more on what the extension workers have to say, or offer, than on what farmers actually require or need.

### Final remarks

This study confirmed that in Chiapas, as in many other places, the decision to change, or the transition process towards organic production, is not always based on environmental concerns, but that it is mainly motivated by economic interests. There is no doubt that a better income is the main driving factor, but both farmers and the institutions that support them do have broader interests. Farmers' practices, for instance, show concern for the farm's biodiversity, water and soil conservation, sowing patterns or the association of certain crops. At the same time, the

programmes of local NGOs include much more than just production for export, looking at local practices and techniques, food security, crop diversification or even human rights.

Another key issue resulting from the analysis carried out is that the transition process in this region does not follow a particular model or strategy. Both farmers and extension workers were seen to be solving problems as they appeared, depending on the external resources available (labour, money, external support). At the same time, the different organisations surveyed showed that, even under similar circumstances and with similar motives, each experience of a transition process for will be different,



Photo: Authors

**Organic coffee production is based on the Maya culture and traditions.**

depending on the importance attached to the different aspects mentioned here. *Arte Natura's* study thus showed the importance of planning the process thoroughly, as a first step for both farmers and the institutions that support them.

The organisations' experience has shown that the transition to organic agriculture is not an easy process. But, in spite of the difficulties, it must also be said that the processes taking place in Chiapas have been successful, as a large percentage of farmers in this region can now be described as organic producers. Looking into the future, it is important not to limit the transition process to the technical aspects of production. On the contrary, the sustainability of the process can only be ensured by considering all the different aspects together when planning future activities.

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