Case report

Exploring youth-community-forest linkages in rural Mexico

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1. Introduction

In Mexico, a global leader in community forestry, recent declines in timber production point to local communities struggling to get the most from their forest commons (Torres-Rojo, Moreno-Sánchez, & Mendoza-Briseño, 2016). External challenges are significant and often tied to market and regulatory hurdles. They are well reported in the literature (Klooster, Taravella, & Hodgdon, 2015). The internal challenges facing forest communities are less studied (Hajjar et al., 2016) and, in the Mexican context, cited for analysis and improvement (Torres-Rojo et al., 2016). One concern is the purported lack of inclusivity in forest work/governance arrangements, which are often dominated by older, male members. The limited involvement of young people, in particular, can deprive communities of critical energy, talent, and leadership potential (Aquino-Moreschi & Contreras-Pastrana, 2016), and at a time when many rural regions are burdened by reduced, aging populations (Robson, Klooster, & Hernandez-Diaz, 2019).

As part of the Future of Forest Work (FoFW) project (this issue), we facilitated conversations with youth from rural Oaxaca, Mexico, about their aspirations, connections, and ideas related to community, forests, and forest-related work. Robson et al. (this issue) provide background on the workshop methodology used to engage youth, and facilitator reflections (including our own) as to how that engagement process unfolded (in different places). In this case report, our focus is less on process and more about the empirical insights gained from talking to youth in two Oaxacan communities – one ‘deep rural’ and the other located close to a major urban centre. We organize our analysis around four thematic areas: youth-land-territory connections; youth perspectives on mobilizing; governance and decision-making; and, educational and work aspirations. The findings are used to reflect on the differentiated nature of contemporary youth-community-forest linkages, and the potential for youth to shape local forest futures.

2. Where we worked and who participated

We engaged youth living in San Juan Evangelista Analco and Jalapa del Valle, two communities that are broadly similar in territorial size and forest area (in the regional context), but differ in ethnicity and history of settlement, rural-urban linkages, forest type and diversity, and (histories of) forest use. Analco, an agrarian (Indigenous Zapotec) community, is located in the sparsely populated northern highlands, a two-hour drive from the state capital, Oaxaca de Juárez. Jalapa is an ejido (mixed ethnicity peasant community) located a short drive west of Oaxaca de Juárez, an expanding urban centre of around 270,000 people. Analco holds collective tenure over its forest lands, has a history of subsistence forest use, and began commercial logging in 2013. Jalapa, likewise, holds collective rights to local forests yet, for much of its recent history (mid-1970s through to 2017), instituted a no touch forest policy. This changed two years ago, when its members voted to eschew strict protection in favour of formal forest management and commercially-oriented timber extraction. The communal authorities (Comisariado de Bienes Comunales, Comisariado Ejidal) in both places have stated a desire to get young people more involved in community projects and activities moving forward.

In each community, 16 young people – of mixed gender and ages (Table 1) – participated in a two-day ‘visioning’ workshop, and completed a short questionnaire.

3. Key youth reflections

3.1. Connections to land and territory

We found little difference between Analco and Jalapa in terms of how often youth get out onto the land, or the numbers of youth whose families depend on land-based activities for their main source of income. However, there were noted differences in terms of where time was spent (on-land) and for what purpose, and the connections to land that this engenders. The families of 12 of the 16 participants in Analco regularly harvest forest products. This was true for 7 of 16 participant families in Jalapa. Analco youth identified 14 distinct territorial landmarks of personal importance, with most chosen as places where participants work the land or harvest resources (with their families). In Jalapa, only 8 sites outside of the village (urban area) were identified, and most (6) were valued for their aesthetics rather than their importance to livelihood. Only three participants in Jalapa, all male and in their 20s, knew the territory well enough to show where chosen sites were located...
on a map. In Analco, most participants had sufficient territorial knowledge for the group to engage in a collective discussion about site locations and the design of an appropriate tour route. In Jalapa, while sites within the village were known by all, few participants had knowledge of the sites identified outside of the village.

Variation in youth-land-forest connections may be partly influenced by differences in the way that community members are exposed to and can access the communal territory and local forests. In Analco, forests are very visible; adjacent to where people live and farm. Villagers also have to pass through forest on their way in and out of the village (to the nearest highway). Jalapa’s forest areas, on the other hand, are located much further from the village, while the main access road (to the community) does not pass through forest lands.

### 3.2. Views on community

Youth were asked to list the things that they wanted to keep in their communities, those to get rid of, and the new things that they would like to see (Table 2). In Analco, participants listed many things to keep, with particular value attached to local traditions, customs, and practices. They spoke of their sense of pride as members of a Zapotec highland community. Traditions were also valued by youth in Jalapa, but in a more understated way. Care for nature was more prominent – possibly a legacy of the community’s long-standing forest conservation policy.

In Analco, youth wanted to get rid of things that would improve the lived environment and thus enhance residents’ health and wellbeing. In Jalapa, youth focused on eliminating the communal service obligations that rights-holders periodically perform in return for the benefit of community membership. In particular, the cargos (traditionally unpaid local governance positions) that oversee the administration of community life. In both communities, youth became animated when discussing new things for their communities. Improved access to health and education services, and sporting facilities, was important in both places. Both sets of participants also listed job creation, although in Analco there was greater reference to on-land’ work activities than in Jalapa.

Youth discussed reasons to remain living in, or move away from, their community (Tables 3 and 4).

Youth in both places valued their communities for healthy living, being close to nature, and, in the case of Analco, for the social cohesion and support that comes with being part of a tight-knit community of people. There was greater divergence in viewpoint with regards to key push factors that lie behind decisions to leave. In Analco, the demands of local governance and declines in cultural cohesiveness were considered trigger points while, in Jalapa, village conservatism, a lack of (meaningful) work, and limited access to public services were ranked as most significant. Youth in both places ranked poor health (and the absence of good local medical services) as an important additional factor. Youth in Jalapa generated longer lists of city benefits (and drawbacks), likely influenced by knowledge gained from close proximity to Oaxaca City and surrounding urban areas. Indeed, all

### Table 1

Profile of youth participants at the two workshops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
<th>Female participation</th>
<th>Age range of participants</th>
<th>Average age of participants</th>
<th>No. born in community</th>
<th>No. with children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analco</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>11–27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalapa</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>13–22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Youth responses to the ‘Keep-Toss-Create’ workshop activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY</th>
<th>Things to “Keep”</th>
<th>Things to “Toss”</th>
<th>Things to “Create”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANALCO</td>
<td>Tequios (collective labour days)</td>
<td>Egoism</td>
<td>Gender equality in the community assemblies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community assemblies</td>
<td>Products that come from the city (to make better use of what’s produced locally)</td>
<td>UMA (Unidad de Manejo Ambiental)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clean and litter-free community</td>
<td>Use of insecticides/chemical fertilizers in agriculture</td>
<td>Orchid Nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School students’ participation in reforestation activities</td>
<td>Illegal hunting</td>
<td>Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Excessive use of gasoline</td>
<td>More pupils to maintain the schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect for historic monuments</td>
<td>Burning of inorganic garbage</td>
<td>Organic market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native language</td>
<td>Unregulated and excessive use of the Internet</td>
<td>Medicines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agriculture and livestock practices</td>
<td></td>
<td>Projects (good projects that create work opportunities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forest management plan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Modern agricultural systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tourist infrastructure/attractive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Better communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public spaces</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improved access to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender equality</td>
<td></td>
<td>New jobs that can be sustained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional medicine</td>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion of Latziduu ecotourism project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JALAPA</td>
<td>Day of the Dead Traditions</td>
<td>Communal service obligations (i.e. cargos, or local governance positions)</td>
<td>Support (scholarships) for students (increase enrolment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Village patron saint fiesta</td>
<td>Unpaid cargos</td>
<td>Free wifi zones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forest Conservation</td>
<td>The agrarian problem with neighbour (boundary issues)</td>
<td>Public toilets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Our care for the river</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participants in the Jalapa workshop were frequent visitors (at least once a week, some daily) to Oaxaca City. This was not the case among Analco youth, few of whom were regular visitors to urban centres.

Youth in both places appreciated the physical space, security, peacefulness, and clean environments that the home village provided: “we have more liberty here… where we lived in the city, there wasn’t much room or space to do things… but here in the community, if one wants to go and walk, there’s no problem, there’s a lot more public space”. But they also cited the lack of personal freedom associated with living in a small community where everyone knows your name. In Analco, egoism was a stated problem, “you know we have this problem here of not allowing individuals to get ahead”. In Jalapa, gossip, jealousy, and conservatism made it difficult for young people to feel “free” to do things without people “talking” about them. In both workshops, it was female youth that spoke more about these issues and associated impacts.

### 3.3. Perspectives on community governance

As noted previously, youth had strong opinions on local governance structures. In Analco, they wanted to keep collective work or labour days (tequios) and community assemblies, which they valued for maintaining political autonomy over village affairs. But some questioned the continued relevance of cargos (unpaid governance positions) – considered a drain on individual and family resources, and a reason to leave the village. It was a view expressed more forcibly in Jalapa, where two of the older, male participants argued for “getting rid of usos y costumbres [traditional governance]”. This prompted pushback from some of the girls, “no, you can’t do that… that’s part of the pueblo”, to which the boys clarified, “well, just the cargos, we don’t need those”. This difference in perspective is probably indicative of communal governance in both places being male-dominated (it’s men who continue to perform the vast majority of village cargos). But it may also speak to how women in rural Oaxaca are considered (or not) a part of broader decision-making spaces.

Youth spoke about wanting more say in community-making institutions and processes. Not only to feel an integral part of the collective, but to hold those in power accountable – to reduce corruption and the misuse of resources. In Analco, those living in the village can participate in assemblies and tequios before they turn 18, and perform cargos upon entering adulthood. Yet, the youth already participating in these institutions noted how little influence they had over decision-making:

“Older men are not willing to listen to others’ opinions… when younger members have something they want to contribute, they either get laughed at or ignored. And it’s something that turns us off and some don’t want to participate anymore” (27-year old male).

Limited female participation was a specific issue of concern:

“It’s really important that we have more balanced participation of men and women in the assemblies. In this community, nearly all the decisions are taken by men. And I have seen, I’ve been in assemblies, and I’ve seen how men dominate everything, even on the issues for which women are well placed to contribute” (27-year old female).

Women in Analco (as well as in Jalapa) can be full rights-holders (with attendant responsibilities). Yet most cases of female rights-holders with governance responsibilities have been single women or those with absent husbands. While there is no legal impediment to female participation in governance and decision-making, the potential for women to take on key roles remains challenged by beliefs and behaviours deeply embedded within local patriarchal-societal structures (Hernandez-Diaz, 2019). More comparative research would be needed to understand variance of this kind, and the implications for gendered roles, responsibilities, and power.

In Jalapa, rules around youth participation in village and territorial governance are more restrictive. Local custom dictates that community members need to married first before they can perform (low-level) cargos, while higher-level governance positions are held exclusively by ejidatarios (rights-holders within the ejido); a status that only the sons and daughters of current ejidatarios can apply for. The lack of youth participation in decision-making arenas became apparent when (workshop) discussions turned to Jalapa’s plan for commercial forestry. When asked, “The assembly approved this [the forest plan], CONAFOR approved it, and now they are carrying out the study… how many of you knew about [these developments]?”, only 6 of 16 participants said that they did. As the group made clear, “they [the authorities] need to keep us informed”.

Lastly, it is worth noting that in both communities, the numbers of participating youth who are continuing, or plan to continue, into higher education (see below) suggest that many will remain outside of local governance structures until well into their twenties, delaying their becoming part of community-making spaces and processes.

### 3.4. Educational and work aspirations

In Analco, two participants worked as farmers and two in off-land employment. In Jalapa, only one of 16 participants were in active employment. Of the 23 participants (from the two workshops) who answered the survey question, “If you are still studying, what level of education do you hope to attain?” 15 planned to do an undergraduate degree and 4 aspired to graduate studies. These educational goals suggest that many youth will leave their home village (at least for a time), with choice of studies tied to their work aspirations. In response to the question, “I would like to be working as a/an ______ when I’m 30 years old”, 13 of 14 respondents in Jalapa want to be working in off-land occupations, with sectors such as healthcare, business, and engineering prominent, while 9 of 11 respondents in Analco also opted for off-land, mainly professional occupations.

We looked for overlap between participants’ ‘ideal’ jobs and the jobs available in their community. There was no clear overlap in either community, pointing to a general mismatch between current work
opportunities and the aspirations of most participants. Upon further analysis, the mismatch was less acute in Analco than in Jalapa. In response to the survey question, “What jobs in the community are most appealing to you?”, 6 of 14 respondents in Jalapa said, “none of them”, with only 2 participants citing an on-land job. In Analco, 2 of 12 responded “none of them”, 4 said “farming”, 4 said “forestry” or “forest technician”, and 1 said “ecotourism”.

As a 15-year old in Analco noted: “It’s not that there isn’t employment here for people, there is work. It’s more a case of people wanting to do that kind of work”. However, as his female compatriot added: “There’s a contradiction here… we say we need work here, to create work and employment, as if there is no work, but there are opportunities. You know they’ve been looking for an ecotourism administrator, and have gone looking for one in Oaxaca because no one from the community has been interested or applied. So, there is something missing. It’s not just about bringing new jobs […] but also creating work out of what already exists”.

When participants were asked to consider the kind of work that they could do in their community, few volunteered forest-based jobs. However, youth in both communities were enthused about forest work ideas in the final workshop activity (‘Pilot Project Ideas’), suggestive that forest work could be attractive and meaningful to youth, especially if they had a say in developing any such opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Youth in both sites exhibited a sense of connectedness to their communities, with this most evident in Analco. Here, several customs and traditions (i.e. music, dance, food, ceremony, the assembly) were highly valued by youth – likely reflective of the community’s longer history of settlement and territoriality, and possibly reflective of its distance from Oaxaca City. Youth want development that “modernizes” yet respects and protects such traditions, and they would like to play a greater role in community-making processes. This was tempered by criticisms of communal service obligations (in particular, cargos), which many youth felt needed reforming. In Jalapa, youth were focused on infrastructure/service improvements and the delivery of economic (over cultural) opportunities. They interact on a near daily basis with Oaxaca City; a mobility that likely influences their opinions and ideas. In addition, they and their families (since the 1970s) have lived within a context of strict forest protection, which encouraged many local people to look off-land for livelihoods. This seems to be reflected in Jalapa youth knowing less about the communal territory than their counterparts in Analco, yet more vocal about the importance of conservation.

Despite being/feeling connected to community (albeit in different ways), a majority of youth in Analco and Jalapa envision their futures, at least for a time, away from the home village. It is a reality and dynamic characteristic of contemporary ruralities in Mexico and other parts of Latin America (see Hecht, 2010), which highlights the multi-dimensional challenge facing community leaderships. In both study communities, leaders propose forest- and land-based work as an engine of local development. Rather than simply assume that the promise of forest jobs will keep young people from leaving, the insights gained from these engagement activities suggest that communities first need to reach out to youth to better understand their motivations, expectations, and ideas. This will help communities to identify and develop opportunities that can better meet young people’s aspirations, encourage more youth to return home after leaving, and adapt governance institutions that incentivise youth to play an active role in village life moving forward.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the youth who participated in the visioning workshops in San Juan Evangelista Analco and Jalapa del Valle. We thank the communal authorities in both communities for allowing us to organize these workshops, and for providing meeting spaces, food, and transportation (for forest tours). We thank Miriam Sosa for her assistance during the two workshops. We thank Iain Davidson-Hunt and Sarah Wilson for reviewing and commenting on the draft manuscript.

Funding

The youth engagement workshops were made possible due to funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of the Canadian Government, through a Connection Grant (# 611-2016-0262).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2019.100140.

References


