

**IDRC Doctoral Research Award – Technical Report****Submitted By:** Kathryn Ervine**Project:** Integrated Conservation and Development in Chiapas, Mexico: Lessons-Learned on Participatory Policy-Making and the Mexico-Mesoamerican Biological Corridor**Introduction**

My dissertation project analyses both the design and subsequent implementation of the Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) - the Mexico-Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MMBC) - in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. One of my main goals has been to situate my study within a multi-scale framework which examines the MMBC as a product of local, national, regional, and international factors – all critical to understanding project outcomes to date (Brown and Purcell 2005). Thus my work has sought to provide a detailed assessment of the conditions under which projects such as the MMBC have been developed at the international level within institutions such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the World Bank – asking to what extent the institutional context influences and/or determines project outcomes both nationally and locally. At the national and state levels, I have specifically studied those political factors which have influenced project decisions (i.e., choice of participant communities, political factionalism, the legacy of clientelist relations, etc.) in order to thoroughly understand the challenges ICDPs face within any national context. Lastly, I have devoted significant attention to understanding how the participatory criteria of the MMBC has been operationalized locally and at the community-level – which has required a detailed analysis of local-level politics and relations of power delineated along gender, ethnic, and class lines. My project takes seriously the contention that ICDPs continue to display “a consistent pattern of under-achievement” resulting from the absence of community participation in their design and implementation (Wells and McShane 2004). This appears to be the case even where projects themselves are designed to be carried out in a participatory manner. Indeed, international institutions charged with developing ICDPs have increasingly made “community participation” a requirement (Wells and McShane 2004) in the implementation of projects in Southern countries, yet part of this under-achievement no doubt stems from the fact that there remains no set criteria regarding what this should ideally entail (Li 2002; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Adams and Rietbergen-McCracken 1994). Moreover, much of the scholarly literature as well fails to explicate what is meant by notions of “participation” and “community,” in conservation and development schemes (Barrow and Fabricius 2002; Colchester 2000; Hulme and Murphree 1999). With this reality in mind, a further objective of my research has been to extend existing critiques of the participatory deficit in ICDPs to an analysis of “participation in practice” which can highlight the diverse and often conflictual circumstances under which participation actually occurs. As such, my work challenges prevailing policy prescriptions which are limited to recommending community inclusion based on an understanding of recipient communities as homogenous and harmonious in both interests and needs.

## **Changes to Research Project**

My initial research proposal submitted to IDRC outlined a comparative case study of two MMBC Focal Areas in Chiapas, Mexico – La Cojolita and Chol Focal Areas respectively. For a number of reasons, the case study was reduced to La Cojolita Focal Area, and the communities of Frontera Corozal, Nueva Palestina, and Lacanjá Chansayab which make up this Focal Area. First, both IDRC reviewers of my proposal and my advisory committee at York University suggested that my project was perhaps overly ambitious for the time-frame within which I intended to carry out fieldwork in Chiapas (eight months in total). Indeed, while La Cojolita Focal Area is limited to three participating communities, the Chol Focal Area contains over 100 participant communities, making an overall comparison of the Focal Areas themselves unmanageable. While it would have been possible to choose a sample of participant communities in the Chol Focal Area, it became increasingly clear during my first fieldwork trip that La Cojolita Focal Area was highly unique in its local socio-political context, problematizing the possibility of a successful and valid comparison with communities in the Chol Focal Area.

La Cojolita Focal Area is located in the Lacandon Jungle and serves as a connector between the Montes Azules Integral Biosphere Reserve (RIBMA) and a number of smaller community and/or government managed protected areas. In 1972, under PRI President Luis Echeverria, the federal government granted the ‘Lacandón Community’ which at the time totaled 66 families, 614,321 hectares of land in the Lacandón Jungle. In 1978, the RIBMA was officially decreed, totaling 331,200 hectares, some 30 percent of which fell outside the territory of the Lacandón Community (Councils 2002; Harvey 2001, 1055). This decision on the part of the federal government generated enormous conflict given that scores of communities had been settled, often for many decades prior to these decisions, within the area handed over to the Lacandón Community (now comprised of Frontera Corozal, Nueva Palestina, and Lacanjá Chansayab) and subsequently included in the RIBMA. Moreover, many were awaiting formal decisions on petitions to regularize their tenancy from the Secretary of Agrarian Reform when these decrees came down (Councils 2002; Harvey 2001, 1055; O'Brien 1998). The result has been decades of conflict between those communities officially sanctioned to reside in the Lacandón Community and the RIBMA, and those that lost legal title to lands with the federal governments decision (De Vos 2002). Many of the communities that found themselves legally dispossessed of their lands have nevertheless remained, often supporting and/or joining the Zapatista movement and its call for justice in the resolution of indigenous land claims. Subsequently, many of these communities currently fall within the territorial limitations of the MMBC, which has seriously complicated its implementation. Given these circumstances, I was further convinced early in my first fieldwork trip that La Cojolita Focal Area and the communities within it should serve as my case study.

## **Summary of Results and Preliminary Conclusions**

The preliminary research conclusions I intend to present in this report are based on the eight months of fieldwork I carried out in Chiapas where I conducted approximately 60

interviews (with representatives from the non-governmental/academic sector, government representatives, and with community members in La Cojolita). As well, during December 2005 myself and fellow researcher Maria Antonieta Bocanegra, a visiting graduate student at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS) – Sureste, carried out a community-level survey on the themes of local developmental needs, biodiversity conservation challenges, and the MMBC, in Frontera Corozal in which 165 community members were surveyed (50 percent of respondents were women, 50 percent men). Participants provided verbal responses which we recorded in written format – the survey overall has made an important contribution to my own conclusions.

In attempting to study participation in practice, with a focus on World Bank participatory criteria for the MMBC (see Appendix), one of the most important thematic sets of research questions that I set out with questioned World Bank participatory criteria that slated community members for participation in the implementation of the MMBC based on their levels of organization (World Bank 2000). With very low levels of formal organization in La Cojolita, approximately 10 percent of community members would be permitted to participate in the development of action plans for the MMBC, while the majority (approximately 80 percent) would receive awareness-raising on the project (World Bank 2000). I thus questioned what consideration was being given to local level social relations of power and how they would affect organizational capacity amongst stakeholders, specifically asking who had a “voice” in speaking *for* community interests and whether the well-organized groups represented powerful interests at the local level. My findings support the contention that participating communities themselves exhibit high levels of internal conflict – resulting in part from local governance structures but also, and related to this, from gender and class inequalities – and thus that the participatory criteria utilized by the Bank to determine who participates in the implementation of the MMBC in fact serves to exacerbate unequal relations of power locally.

Local governance structures in Frontera Corozal, Nueva Palestina, and Lacanjá Chansayab are based on the communal tradition in the region which grants voting rights to landowners (*comuneros*) only (Solano and Franco 1996). In turn, only men are permitted to own land which ultimately leaves decision-making power in their hands. Based on community-level interviews and results from the community survey in Frontera Corozal, it is clear that this communal tradition has in the past but is also increasingly generating a significant level of internal conflict within these communities. This stems especially from the fact that historically the small minority of male decision-makers within these communities have been able to channel funds and resources towards their preferred projects, yet have done so in the name of the “community.” Moreover, *comuneros* continue to choose one male child to receive his land upon his death, and thus voting rights in communal assemblies, leaving the remaining family members (in a region where families continue to have between 5-8 children (INEGI 2000)), landless and excluded from local decision-making bodies. I was told over and over by interviewees that the opportunity for participation in community decision-making did not exist, that a crisis of land (landlessness in particular) was emerging with population growth, and more than one observer suggested that violent confrontation between community members was only a matter of time.

Attempts at participatory project implementation with the best of intentions would prove difficult under these circumstances, suggesting the crucial need for participatory tools capable of engaging excluded groups directly, while also respecting local customs as much as possible. Within this context, World Bank participatory criteria which limits participation in the development of actions plans to the highly organized/producer groups seems counter-intuitive under the circumstances outlined above. Comuneros exhibit high levels of organization, at the community assembly level, but also around productive activities which largely include cattle ranching, transportation service provision, and increasingly, ecotourism. Within this context, they overwhelmingly become the target participants according to MMBC project criteria. This necessarily functions to the exclusion of marginalized local level stakeholders in project implementation – thus calling into question the extent to which the project can be labeled participatory at all. If we take seriously the now widely accepted contention that the genuine participation of affected local level stakeholders is one of the dominant measures of project long-term success, much current participatory practice within the MMBC must be called into question. It is imperative that policy is designed with the goal of empowering marginalized groups rather than re-enforcing pre-existing exclusionary mechanisms at the local level.

This is particularly crucial within highly unequal gender environments (Gupte 2004). In La Cojolita Focal Area, women are not permitted to own land and thus are excluded from local decision-making forums and bodies. Moreover, language barriers pose a further obstacle for women in that the majority of adult women do not speak Spanish, but rather their maternal indigenous language. As is the norm for most government and/or international development projects in the region, information about the MMBC (written and verbal) has been provided in Spanish only – which has cut women off from critical sources of information regarding the project itself. A number of government officials involved in the MMBC were quite honest and forthcoming during interviews that there remains no formal gender strategy on how to include women in the implementation of the MMBC, and they were uncertain as to when one might be developed. There was some expectation that women should be informed by community representatives of project intentions, yet my research within La Cojolita suggested that this was not taking place, with the majority of women who were interviewed and/or participated in the survey never having heard of the project. It is widely recognized that rural poor women bear the main responsibility for ensuring a ready supply of fuel in order to cook, clean, and bathe household members, while also representing the primary healthcare providers for the family, relying heavily on available biological resources to meet these needs (IDRC 2000, 10; Mwangola 1993). Biodiversity conservation is thus highly gendered and the exclusion of women in decisions regarding its future use seriously compromises sustainable livelihood opportunities. The implementation of the MMBC, rather than providing an opportunity to resolve such dilemma's, is in fact opening the door to increased gender inequality at the community level.

As already suggested above, studying the three communities within La Cojolita Focal Area in isolation from wider regional social and political considerations would limit my ability to consider overall lessons-learned on MMBC implementation. The intense conflict over land tenure rights in the Lacandon Jungle, which has deep historical roots which pre-date the MMBC itself, has played a significant role in impeding project

implementation in the region. All participating communities in the MMBC are required to develop community conservation and development plans to be funded by the project. They should ideally propose what strategies and concrete sustainable development projects the communities wish to pursue, which if approved, will be funded in turn. Within the context of inter-community conflict over the agrarian problem (contested land-tenure claims resulting from the creation of the RIBMA and the granting of a significant amount of land to the Lacandón Community), the Lacandón Community attempted to use the MMBC as a tool to resolve the conflict. Few observers agree on who should legally control the land which was granted to the Lacandón Community – with many noting that numerous communities within the territory were settled long before the government decrees of the 1970s and that they simply lack the official documents to prove their ownership. The initial community proposal put forth to MMBC officials by Frontera Corozal, Nueva Palestina, and Lacanjá Chansayab called for the removal/relocation of communities residing within their territory, and/or financial compensation for the land lost. This is little surprising given the historical antecedents of the conflict – yet these community goals fall entirely outside of MMBC project goals. The overarching lesson to be derived from this experience - which contributed to significant project delays as officials and community representatives battled over the proposal, with the Lacandón Community officially suspending participation in the MMBC in light of official claims that the MMBC could not, and should not deal with a problem which was outside its purview - is that project designs which ignore local level political realities and conflicts set the project itself up for serious challenges. Valuable time and resources must be devoted to the resolution of these issues once they are brought into the project fold, and one has to question whether it would ever be possible to exclude them in the first place.

During interviews, some (government officials in particular) claimed that this was a result of project design within international institutions such as the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility which are far removed from local level realities and seek to reduce projects to their most basic technical components. On the other hand, I conducted interviews with numerous civil society representatives and even a former top official within the MMBC, who asserted that the project itself was being manipulated by government officials in an effort to support and advance vested political interests. In this sense, it was asserted that the choice of participating communities failed to account for both political decision-making structures and critical biological and ecological criteria that might facilitate project success, as politicians rushed to gain project approval prior to a possible change in government federally in 2000. Moreover, many claimed that the Lacandón Community has consistently and historically supported the ruling elite in Chiapas –which has been aligned specifically with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In a region of marked political conflict and violence, many noted that the choice of participant communities ensured the continued support for the PRI (typical of clientelist politics whereby rewards, i.e., the MMBC, are distributed based on continued political support and compliance with preferred policy), while also marginalizing further non-participating groups and communities, many of which have been aligned with, or sympathetic to the goals of the Zapatista movement. Based on interviews conducted within participating communities, with government officials themselves, and with civil society representatives (including representatives of communities within MMBC territory

that are not participating in the MMBC), I believe a combination of all of these factors are at play. I also believe it's important not to reduce participating communities to broad generalizations while at the same time recognizing the validity of such contentions. What has emerged as a serious consideration is the fact that a majority of residents and thus communities within the geographical limits of the MMBC have not been chosen to participate in the project. These are communities that nevertheless reside in areas of extreme biological importance, yet interviews with members of non-participating communities and government officials demonstrated that such communities are not being informed even minimally of the projects existence or its goals, thereby excluding a crucial constituency in efforts to conserve biodiversity in the region.

The difficulties presented by this situation have not gone unnoticed and project officials informed me during interviews that they recently received approval from Bank officials to allow producer groups engaged in sustainable development initiatives (i.e., organic agriculture) in Chiapas in general to apply for MMBC funds, yet there has been little attempt to publicize and/or engage groups outside of officially participating communities in MMBC activities in general.

It appears clear to me at this point that the participatory criteria included within the MMBC was designed that way (to favour the highly organized/producer groups) to achieve a number of goals which do not originate in participating communities. At a very basic level, given the scale of the project (there are four participating states within the MMBC in Mexico, while the much larger Mesoamerican Biological Corridor spans the entire Mesoamerican region), genuine participation may appear logistically impossible at the policy-making level – and thus a process of 'selective' participation takes place instead. While the rationale for this choice is somewhat understandable, the outcome may very well work against conservation and development, but also democratic processes locally. It is imperative that policy-makers take this into account.

However, a further strategic goal which is fulfilled through a selective participatory program such as the one included in the MMBC seems to be the marginalization and/or elimination of critical voices. Institutions such as the World Bank and the GEF have largely adopted a market-based approach to biodiversity conservation which seeks to commodify biodiversity as a resource to be bought and sold in the market – premised on the argument that only once it is adequately valued can its continued existence be ensured. While certainly there is some logic behind this argument, it also has many flaws, while presenting some perplexing and difficult problems for stakeholders who insist that biodiversity is not a commodity. For many, access to biodiversity is a basic human right, and it holds immense cultural significance for the groups that depend on it to meet basic livelihood needs. The well-documented opposition of many indigenous groups to a market-based understanding of biodiversity thus poses potentially insurmountable obstacles to an agenda which has minimal flexibility on this issue. It was clear during my fieldwork that the groups eligible to participate in the development of action plans at the community level (the highly organized and/or producer groups) were already significantly integrated into the regional market-based economy and were quite eager to access project funds under the guidelines stipulated. On the other hand, the enormous civil society opposition to the MMBC in Chiapas, particularly from indigenous groups and their representatives, was well-documented. If project officials had had to seriously negotiate with these groups while providing them with genuinely participatory spaces

through which to voice their concerns/opposition, it is entirely possible that the MMBC in its original form (designed at the institutional level with no community input as it were), would have been defeated as an acceptable model for community-based conservation and development. Thus selective participation effectively limits the channels through which opposition may be articulated – yet with problematic consequences for democratic conservation and development prospects. So long as policy makers reject genuine dialogue, however difficult and messy that may be, as a critical component in the success of any ICDP, the projects themselves will continue to result in “overwhelming underachievement.”

### **Unanticipated Difficulties**

One of the goals of my initial research project was to study the implementation and outcomes of sustainable development projects as part of the MMBC. Unfortunately during my second field trip to Chiapas (June – September 2006), there were still no projects in place at the local level. This reality is quite stark given that the MMBC officially began in Mexico in 2001 and had a completion date set for 2008 (seven years in total). Indeed, sustainable development projects at the local level (organic agriculture, etc.) are the intended vehicles through which conservation and development goals are to be achieved – and thus by this measure, the project is failing miserably in the case of Chiapas. Interviews with government officials revealed that the World Bank is considering the extension of the project until 2010 (this would seem absolutely imperative), yet they also indicated that they are pushing to have the MMBC extended to other Mexican states, including Oaxaca and Guerrero. The experience to date would certainly suggest that such an extension is ill-guided – if the MMBC has done very little in the four participant states to date – how with an extra 2 years can it be expected to achieve its overall goals within the existing project area while adding new states to the slate? I suspect some of this at least (based on interviews), is motivated by a desire for institutional preservation.

In the case of Chiapas, the MMBC has faced immense civil society opposition, particularly given that President Fox announced early in his term as President that the MMBC was the ‘green’ component of the Plan Puebla Panama – an infrastructural development project which was being actively opposed by many within civil society for favouring corporate and elite interests to the exclusion of community development and democracy. The two projects were not in fact related, however, the statement by Fox led to a highly publicized campaign in Chiapas against the MMBC. In turn, then Governor of Chiapas (Pablo Salazar) refused to grant state level approval to the project until 2004 – a necessary requirement for the project to move ahead. This was also related to the fact that a Social Assessment (SA) was required prior to the commencement of the project whereby community groups and local stakeholders would be consulted on the project in a ‘participatory’ manner (according to the Bank). The actual SA in Chiapas in fact failed to consult with communities (the team contracted to carry out the SA in Chiapas argued, amongst other things, that the Bank’s model of a door-to-door survey could not be utilized in Chiapas given the absence of trust related to the on-going Zapatista conflict, etc.). The Bank approved the Chiapas SA which lacked any community participation component, with Governor Salazar using this fact as further reason to withhold

government approval of the MMBC until a second SA was carried out which was deemed participatory in nature (many interviewed argued that it too lacked genuine participation).

Once the project finally received government approval in 2004, participating communities were to begin to draft community sustainable development plans, and as already discussed, the first plan submitted by the Lacandón Community required that MMBC funds be directed towards resolving the 'agrarian conflict.' This led to further delays as the Lacandón Community officially suspended participation in the project when officials responded that the MMBC was not intended to deal with agrarian issues. With the ensuing stalemate delaying the project even further, MMBC officials were finally able to approve 500,000 pesos to support a series of community conflict resolution meetings. In December 2005, and subsequently during the summer of 2006, neither the Lacandón Community collectively, nor the communities of Frontera Corozal, Nueva Palestina, or Lacanjá Chansayab had yet submitted new community sustainable development project proposals. Requests from government officials for an official timeline as to when proposals would be submitted went unanswered.

The community leader's themselves noted on multiple occasions that they perceive the requirements of the MMBC to be overly-bureaucratized and inefficient. In an environment where historically, government promises for new projects and funding opportunities have often been empty, there seems to be an enormous level of distrust at the community level towards any project. This was matched by a high level of cynicism amongst community representatives, with many frequently expressing the sentiment during interviews that the MMBC was just another example of projects promising a lot but doing nothing. While many of these sentiments contradicted others, it appeared that the community representatives were not placing a high priority of finishing their community sustainable development plans – influenced I believe by the historical experience with government projects within these communities. Combined, these factors meant I was unable to consider how MMBC participatory criteria was playing into the development of community sustainable development plans, or to examine their outcomes.

### **Emerging Considerations**

One of the most important questions that has emerged out of my research deals with the nature of the 'development' that finds itself partnered with conservation in ICDPs. Conventional wisdom tells us that conservation and development are necessary allies in the struggle to preserve global biodiversity, and I would certainly agree with this. However, the way in which development is defined and envisioned within projects themselves has not received sufficient attention in my mind. In the case of the MMBC, development entails the implementation of micro-projects of sustainable development – organic coffee, honey, chile production; reforestation and the sale of environmental services such as carbon sequestration, etc. Absent from the development being promoted within the MMBC is any mention of health, education, the provision of basic services and so on. Respondents to the community survey in Frontera Corozal overwhelmingly saw their main developmental problems as stemming from a lack of basic education services (primary, secondary, and post-secondary), from the lack of primary health care services, and from the lack of basic infrastructural services such as a sewage system – contributing to increased rates of sickness within the community. The MMBC itself does not address

these developmental concerns explicitly (despite their relation to biodiversity degradation) – and to the extent that it does, there is an implicit assumption that revenues generated from micro-level sustainable development projects should be channeled into community development projects in these areas. This in and of itself is a questionable expectation when participatory criteria privileges a small minority rather than the wider-community, but the notion of development that I encountered within the MMBC seems to further support a neo-liberal agenda of decreased state support and responsibility for the provision of developmental goods. This is a theme upon which much greater reflection is required, and I thus do not wish to make any concrete conclusions at this point. What I do want to suggest tentatively however is that ‘development’ as a partner in conservation and development, is envisioned minimally as a means to achieve environmental goals – not as a fundamental human right. If this is the case, advocates of conservation and development must recognize that this approach is fraught with danger as development is reduced to micro-projects lacking in any substantive notion of a wider human development – and thus perhaps, it is time to rethink our own discourse to more adequately reflect the processes taking place on the ground and in order to eliminate what appear to be a highly confused set of goals.

## **Appendix 1**

### **World Bank MMBC Participatory Criteria**

In developing its participatory schema for the MMBC, the World Bank chose to use ‘levels of organization’ as the main criteria for classifying community and producer groups locally (World Bank 2000, 1: Annex 11). According to the Bank, “the level of organization ...to a large degree would guarantee the effective participation of these groups in the project” (World Bank 2000, 1: Annex 11). Levels of organization were classified as Type 1 (sub-types 1a and 1b) indicating communities with low levels of organization, and Type 2 (sub-types 2a and 2b) indicating communities with high levels of organization. The Bank estimated, based on the Social Assessment carried out prior to project inception, that 70 percent of participating communities fell into Type 1, with the remaining 30 percent in Type 2 (World Bank 2000, 1: Annex 11). A set of performance indicators were developed to measure project success, with community participation successful if “communities (and/or producers groups) in focal areas are engaged in different forms (depending on levels of organization) of local planning oriented towards conservation and sustainable use” (World Bank 2000, 2). Targets for community engagement included (World Bank 2000, 2):

- a) Awareness raising (at least 80% of focal areas’ surface and/or 80% of communities)
- b) Problem assessment (at least 50%)
- c) Priority setting (at least 30%)
- d) Development of action plans (at least 10%)

Thus project managers can conclude that community participation is successful if at least 10 percent of participants (the highly organized) participate in the development of action plans, while the majority is subject to some form of awareness-raising.

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Kathryn Ervine



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