

Trade and Totomoxtle: Coping with NAFTA in the Totanacan Region of Veracruz

Amanda King

Many parts of rural Mexico have experienced the upheavals anticipated before implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). One expectation of NAFTA that has not come to pass is the disappearance of small-scale maize production. Today, despite rock-bottom prices for maize grain, and the options afforded by migration, many farmers continue to grow maize as they have for centuries. What ties these farmers to their traditions, and how do they cope with the changing economic conditions?

These are some of the questions I explored during the past year as a Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellow based at the International Center for Maize and Wheat Improvement. My research took me to Zona Totonaca, an area of Veracruz with a large indigenous population and poverty levels that can be severe by Mexico's standards.

In the Zona Totanaca, as in most of Mexico, maize production is more than just a source of livelihood—it is a way of life. According to one creation myth, the gods created humans from a mixture of blood and maize dough. Maize is a staple food and consumed daily basis in the form of tortillas, which provide much of the caloric intake in rural areas. In addition, maize is the basis of foods such as *elotes*, the Mexican version of corn-on-the-cob, and *tamales* which are a mixture of ingredients incorporated into maize dough and steamed in the maize husk.

Maize also plays an important ecological role. Mexico is a center of maize diversity, home to hundreds of folk or *criollo* varieties created through farmer management and natural selection. Maize diversity is essential because it provides farmers and plant breeders with the means of adapting crops to changing environments and resistance to pests and diseases. With growing incentives to switch to new export crops and hybrid maize varieties, many researchers feared that NAFTA reforms would threaten Mexico's maize diversity by undermining the demand for folk varieties and the cultural and agricultural practices that maintain them.

Following the implementation of NAFTA, Mexican markets opened to a flood of U.S. exports. From 1994 to 1996, maize grain prices dropped by as much as 48 percent. Farmers

all over Mexico scrambled to respond to the rapid erosion of their livelihoods. Many left their towns and migrated to work in cities or in *maquiladoras* along the U.S. border. Increasing numbers also left to seek employment within the U.S. In addition to migrating, branching out from staple crops helped some farmers to cope with economic change. In Zona Totonaca, for example, wealthier farmers began to produce chilies and tomatoes for export.

Farmers lacking the financial assets to diversify their harvests hit upon a different solution to the evolving economic crisis by making use of a resource they already had in abundance. Maize husks, a byproduct of maize production, are used throughout Mexico for making tamales. Since NAFTA, increasing migration has fueled the demand for Mexican food products in the United States. Communities throughout the Zona Totonaca are taking advantage of this and becoming involved in the production for export of maize husks, called *totomoxtle* in the Nahuatl language.

Totomoxtle production provides employment at various stages of its preparation. Men, women and children are involved in the production process, and while many of the tasks pay relatively little, the sale of the *totomoxtle* combined with the labor provide an important source of added income for families. In some areas, husk production is now even more important than grain, earning farmers about 10 times the price per kilo as grain.

From the perspective of one farmer, the business is profitable because, "there is maize husk all year, the harvest is twice a year, and people remove husks little by little. Selling the husks helps farmers—they buy fertilizer with the extra money."

While husk production has provided an important source of labor and added income in the communities where it is produced, it has also provided additional incentive for farmers to continue to grow their *criollo* varieties. These varieties yield superior husks for tamales than does hybrid maize, even though *criollo* grain typically fetches a poor price in both local and regional markets.

Because of the growing economic importance of *totomoxtle*, farmers have even started to change their maize selection practices, looking for varieties with greater yields and



© Amanda King

Totomoxtle, or maize husks, a byproduct of maize production, provide poor farmers in rural Mexico with an added source of income as their American neighbors discover a taste for tamales.

better husk cover. The new economic incentive to continue producing maize is not only helping to ensure local food security, but is giving hope that the genetic diversity which is represented by these varieties will be conserved for future generations.

Even while trade liberalization has hurt many communities in rural Mexico, small-scale farmers have been surprisingly resilient in their coping strategies and their ability to seek out new opportunities. For the farmers in the Zona Totonaca of Veracruz, Mexico, this required looking at familiar resources from a new perspective.

Mexico's often bitter experience with NAFTA indicates that the rise of international trade does not necessarily signal the demise of rural communities altogether. As the switch to *totomoxtle* production in the Zona Totonaca demonstrates, communities are redefining themselves as they draw upon both traditional and experimental strategies in their struggle to cope with the landscape of change.

Amanda King conducted her research on the impact of NAFTA on Mexican maize farmers from July 2003 to June 2004. Her work was made possible through the Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows Program of the U.S. Congressional Hunger Center.