AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE

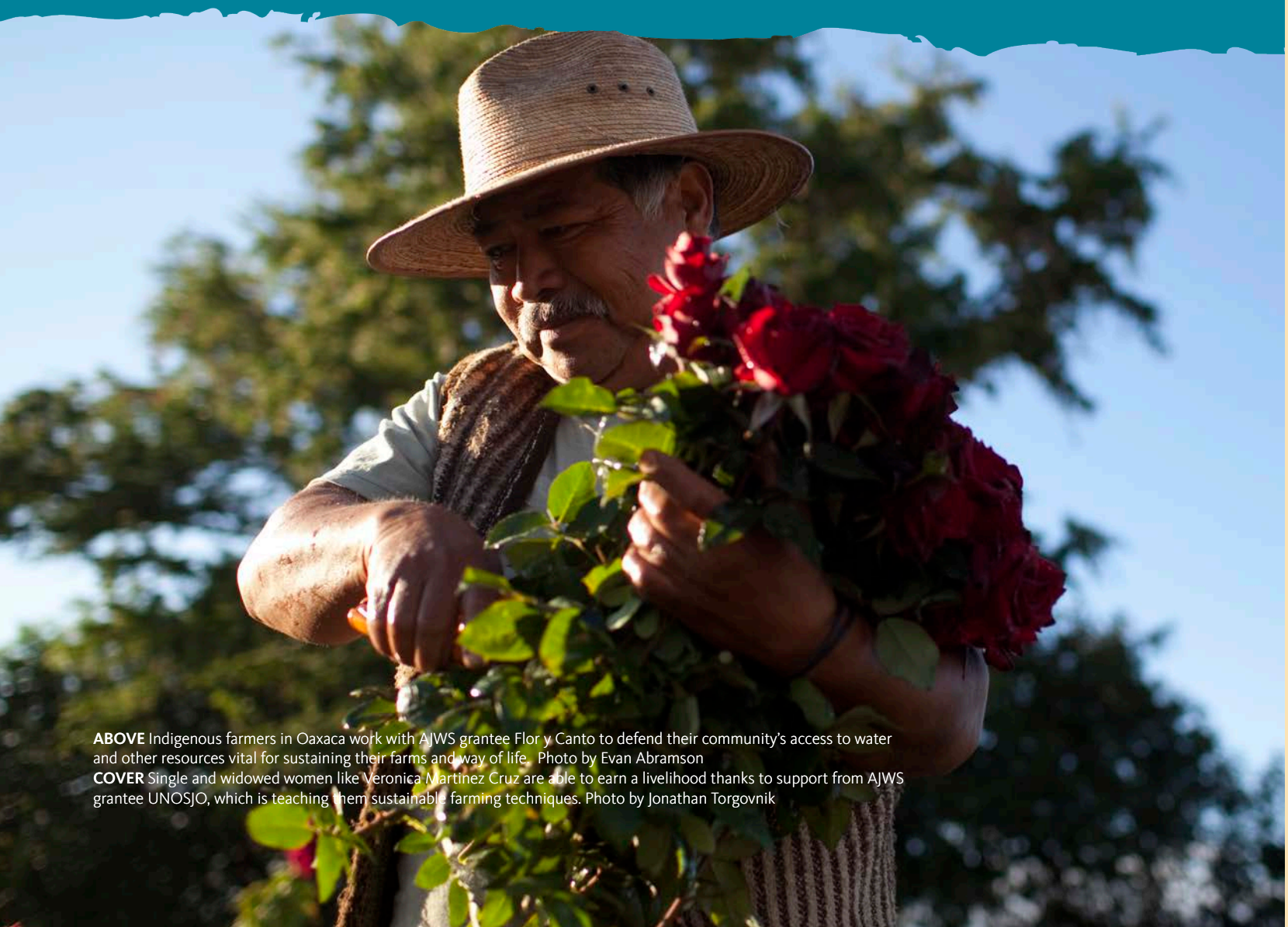
PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

OUR MISSION

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing our communities in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world.

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

AJWS has supported human rights efforts in Mexico since 1989. We have granted a total of $9.4 million and currently support 23 grantees working on two critical human rights issues: promoting civil and political rights and defending land, water and climate justice. As Mexico's grassroots activists mobilize and organize to make their country a more just and equitable society, AJWS provides funding, support and solidarity.



ABOVE Indigenous farmers in Oaxaca work with AJWS grantee Flor y Canto to defend their community's access to water and other resources vital for sustaining their farms and way of life. Photo by Evan Abramson
COVER Single and widowed women like Veronica Martinez Cruz are able to earn a livelihood thanks to support from AJWS grantee UNOSJO, which is teaching them sustainable farming techniques. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik

AJWS GRANTEES
IN MEXICO

Servicios para una Educación Alternativa
Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montana Tlachinollan
Centro de Investigación en Comunicación Comunitaria A.C.
Centro para los Derechos de la Mujer, Naaxwiin
Servicios y Asesoría Para la Paz
Centro José María Morelos y Pavón
Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera
Sabuesos Guerreras
Desaparecidos de El Fuerte
Voces unidas por la vida y la dignidad humana
Unión de Madres con Hijos De Desaparecidos de Sinaloa de los años 70's

Proyecto de Derechos Economicos, Sociales y Culturales A.C.
Union de Comunidades Indigenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo
Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca
Colectivo Oaxaqueño en Defensa del Territorio
Centro De Derechos Indigenas Flor y Canto, A.C.
Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, A. C.
Servicios del Pueblo Mixe, A.C.
Servicios para una Educación Alternativa
The Project on Organizing, Development, Education, and Research
Otros Mundos, A.C.

WHY WE SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

Mexico is home to vibrant and diverse cultures and is one of the largest economies on the planet. But the country also suffers from tremendous corruption, violence and inequality. Many people live in extreme poverty, while those with power—government officials, leaders of transnational corporations and organized criminals—amass vast wealth.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIZATION

The roots of many challenges facing Mexico stem from its history of colonization. For millennia, advanced indigenous societies like the Maya, Zapotec and Aztec lived off the land, using their own sophisticated systems of agriculture, mathematics, architecture, astronomy, language and theology. But starting in the 1500s, the Spanish invaded and wiped out millions of indigenous people.[1] The Spanish colonizers—conquistadors[2]—imposed a regime of forced labor on the survivors,[3] declared Roman Catholicism the sole permissible religion and made Spanish the official language of the region.[4]

Spanish rule ended in 1821, when Mexico ousted the Spanish and gained independence. Yet, Mexico's people continued to suffer through decades of political clashes and coups. When Porfirio Diaz seized control of the country in 1876, he ushered in a 30-year era of dictatorial rule. He developed and modernized the country but, at the same time, threatened indigenous people and formed a nationwide group of thugs notorious for ruling over the people through the slogan *pan o palo* "bread or the stick." He rewarded supporters with bribes, public office and land, and he punished opponents with assassination or exile. Unfortunately, Diaz was hardly the last politician to abuse his post in Mexico.[5]

20TH CENTURY REVOLUTION, VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION

The Mexican Revolution (from 1910 to 1920) ousted Diaz and led to the election of a series of presidents and the drafting of a new constitution promising the redistribution of land and social reform. Some of the reforms the constitution promised came about; for instance, President Lazaro Cardenas distributed 44 million acres of land to more than 800,000 people in the '30s in an effort to address poverty.

But unfortunately, this experiment in democracy resulted in a new form of dictatorship. In 1929, President Plutarco Elias Calles established the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party—known as "the PRI"); this government ruled for the next 72 years with an iron fist, using intimidation, propaganda, military force and other authoritarian tactics to dominate Mexican politics until the new millennium.[6] In the 1960s, government leaders began detaining, torturing and even murdering citizens in a coordinated effort to repress other political parties.

Although Mexico's government is still technically democratic, leaders frequently rig elections and extort money from citizens. A 2013 Transparency International survey revealed that 61 percent of people in Mexico reported paying a bribe to police within the past year alone.[7] Not surprisingly, less than 40 percent of Mexicans say they trust their national government.[8]

The legacies of the colonial era continue to divide the country both socioeconomically and culturally. People of European descent have more power and wealth, and they discriminate against and exploit Mexico's indigenous people, who struggle to maintain their vibrant cultures and ways of life that have survived centuries of persecution.

A 'WAR ON DRUGS' INCREASES THREATS TO CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

In recent decades, Mexican society has faced a frightening combination of drug cartels, organized crime, corrupt police and government officials and armed military action. In 2006, the Mexican government declared a "war on drugs" and unleashed tremendous military force, injecting shocking levels of violence into the everyday life of Mexican communities. In some areas, ordinary citizens have been tortured, raped or killed by the very authorities enlisted to protect them. The Mexican drug war, backed by the U.S. government, has resulted in an estimated 70,000 murders and 26,000 disappearances (abductions likely resulting in murder).[9]

[1] Mexican Cultural Institute of Washington D.C. History Page.
[2] From conquistadores, which means "conquerors" in Spanish. From the 15th to 17th centuries, the conquistadors of Spain and Portugal established many colonies throughout the world.
[3] La Botz, Dan. "A Brief history of Mexico." UE International.
[4] "Schmitt, Karl. "The Díaz Policy on State and Local Levels, 1876–1911." Hispanic American Historical Review (Nov. 1960): 513-532
[5] "Porfirio Diaz," Historic World Leaders, 4: North & South America, A-L. Detroit and London, Gale Research, Inc, 1994, *212-216.*
[6] Citizens had high hopes for a return to democracy in 2000, when Vicente Fox's election broke the one-party rule—but many people in Mexico regard him as corrupt, too. The country reverted to a PRI president, Enrique Pena Nieto, in 2012.
[7] Mexico. Global Corruption Barometer 2013. Transparency International.
[8] "Mexico." Key Findings. OECD Better Life Index.
[9] "Mexico: Disappearances Response Falls Short." Human Rights Watch 8 Oct. 2014.

A woman carries a sign demanding the release of 43 "disappeared" college students during a protest mobilized by AJWS grantee Tlachinollan Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montana. (See story, page 11). Photo courtesy of Tlachinollan

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

- 52.3 percent of Mexico's population lives below the national poverty line.[12]
- Between 2006 and 2013, Mexico's Federal Attorney General's Office opened 1,219 investigations into complaints of torture and other ill-treatment, but only initiated 12 prosecutions for torture. The vast majority of these crimes went unpunished.[13]
- Tens of thousands of Mexicans have disappeared (abducted and likely murdered) since the start of the drug war. In August 2014, the government acknowledged that it still didn't know the whereabouts of 22,000 people who have been missing since 2006.
- 15 percent of Mexico's people identify as "indigenous."[14]
- Between 2001 and 2012, the Mexican government granted 28,807 mining concessions—permits that allow Mexican and transnational companies to explore or mine—on approximately 61.8 million acres of land.[15]

[12]World Bank. Mexico Data page. 2014.
[13]"Out of Control: Torture and other ill-treatment in Mexico." *Amnesty International. 4 Sept. 2014.*
[14]"Advancing Indigenous People's Rights in Mexico." United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
[15]Latin Lawyer. Mexico Page. 24 April 2014.

THE BATTLE FOR LAND RIGHTS

In recent years, mineral mining, industrial farming and other economic development projects have swept across Mexico—consuming large tracts of rural land that indigenous people have farmed peacefully and productively for thousands of years. In most cases, the government backs these projects without consulting or gaining the consent of the local people. Recent energy policy reforms have further weakened environmental regulations and rights, opening the country to private investment and allowing corporations to bid for the rights to drill for or extract a variety of natural resources. These policies are often enacted in the name of development, but they fail to consider the ramifications for people who depend on the land for survival.

Activists say the projects have polluted land and water, displaced residents, and created a domino effect of increased poverty and compromised health. The government and the corporations that have been given carte blanche to plunder the land have evicted many indigenous communities, robbing them of their means of making a living and of the land that has played such a critical role in forging their cultures. In many regions, mines and new development projects sap the water table, dessicating previously fertile small farms used by indigenous communities. For example, in the Asunción Ocotlán Valley, local farmers accuse the government of restricting the indigenous community's access to water while providing plenty of water for nearby commercial farms.

THE DANGERS OF DISSENT

Courageous activists and community members throughout Mexico speak out against this corruption and injustice at great personal risk. Many human rights defenders have been harassed, threatened—and even murdered. A Mexican watchdog organization, the National Network of Human Rights Defenders, recorded 242 attacks on human rights advocates in 2013 alone.[10]

To help protect these courageous activists, many of AJWS's grants in Mexico include support for training in life-saving safety and security measures. When we ask our grantees

[10]Connell, Tula. "Mexican Senate Recognizes Human Rights Activist Ancheita." Solidarity Center 26 March 2015.

why they risk so much to do this work, they explain that they are ensuring a better future for their families, communities and for all of Mexico.

AJWS GRANTEES RESPOND TO INJUSTICE

While the challenges in Mexico are formidable, AJWS's grantees remain vigilant—and hopeful. Every day, they respond courageously to violence and injustice by advocating for government accountability, bringing crimes to justice in the courts, strengthening the leadership of women and indigenous people, and helping communities defend their land. Day by day, they make progress toward achieving a better future.

Their work focuses on our two key issues in Mexico: advancing the civil and political rights of all citizens and protecting the food, land and water that indigenous people depend on for survival.

An organization called **Tlachinollan** has been leading the fight for justice for 43 college student protestors who went missing after a clash with police in September 2014. Tlachinollan has been providing legal representation to the students' families and advocating for the UN to provide oversight of the investigation (see page 11 for the full story). In 2014, the organization won a conviction in another human rights case against four soldiers who raped and tortured indigenous leaders in 2002. This historic trial marked the first time that Mexican soldiers were tried and brought to justice for rape in a civilian court—where military officials couldn't cover up or pardon the crimes.

In 2013, **Colectivo Oaxaqueño en Defensa del Territorio (Oaxacan Collective in Defense of Territory)** helped an indigenous town in Oaxaca's central valleys stop the encroachment of mines on its land. The town, called Magdalena Teitipac, achieved a legal ruling that made it the first territory in Mexico that would be off-limits for any future mining projects. More recently, CODT's work put another town, Capulalpam de Mendez, on the map as the first territory legally declared completely free of mining (page 14).

Centro de Derechos Indigenas Flor y Canto (Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights) is pursuing innovative tactics to ensure that indigenous farmers have enough water to survive. In 2013, the organization led and won a lawsuit against the National Water Commission, which had been illegally charging an indigenous community for water.

In this landmark victory, the court mandated the commission to give the farmers a vote and a voice in how water resources are allocated. Flor y Canto is now helping other communities negotiate their claims against the government and advocating for fair and equal water policies (page 20).

Ser Mixe (To Be Mixe) mobilizes members of the Mixe indigenous community to advocate for the government to develop their land in ways that are sustainable and won't undermine the local people's way of life. Ser Mixe brings cases involving land rights to the courts and has played a crucial role in mediating conflicts in the region, helping local indigenous community leaders and the federal government negotiate agreements on land use. As part of its work, Ser Mixe runs workshops and spreads its messages through press conferences and its own radio programs.

2017 EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

In September 2017, Mexico suffered two major earthquakes that claimed hundreds of lives and left thousands without homes. AJWS sprang into action to support grassroots partners and provided $212,438 for immediate relief and long-term support.

Civilians call for an end to violence in a protest organized by Tlachinollan. Photo courtesy of Tlachinollan Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña

OUR COMMITMENT IN MEXICO

AJWS is committed to helping Mexico's people advocate for their civil and political rights and protect the land and natural resources that many families depend on for survival.

Our grantees are:

- Investigating the wave of forced disappearances since the start of the drug war and seeking to bring the perpetrators of these and other crimes to justice
- Documenting human rights violations to expose violence sanctioned by the government
- Supporting human rights activists to protect themselves from violence committed in retaliation for their efforts
- Engaging citizens and the government to defend all people's civil and political rights, particularly the rights to information, assembly, association and freedom of expression
- Increasing the leadership and civil and political participation of indigenous people, youth and women
- Organizing indigenous communities to learn about and advocate for legal protections for their land and water
- Ensuring that indigenous people have a voice in making decisions about mining and other development projects that may affect their land and way of life
- Strengthening grassroots organizations and fostering collaboration among likeminded groups, to increase their collective power to promote human rights in Mexico
- Responding to communities in the aftermath of the 2017 earthquakes so they can rebuild and recover

TOTAL AJWS FUNDING IN MEXICO SINCE 1989
$9.4 MILLION

Damiana Vasquez Garcia and her husband Nereo claim that the Mexican national water service is charging them 10 or 20 times what it charges commercial farms next door. With help from AJWS grantee Flor y Canto, their community in San Antonio has persuaded the government that indigenous people must play a role in managing the water distribution system to ensure that all residents are treated equally. (See story, page 20)
Photo by Evan Abramson

BEYOND GRANTMAKING: HOW DOES AJWS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

To advance social change in the developing world, AJWS gives more than funding: We work to ensure that the advocates we support can succeed under some very difficult circumstances.

We know that it takes time to make change, so we offer multi-year grants. We invest in nascent groups with great potential and build their capacity to expand and grow stronger. We understand that activists and organizations need opportunities to sharpen their strategies, so we convene trainings and bring similar groups together, enabling them to learn new skills from experts and from one another.

We believe that for social change efforts to work, it's critical to examine what's working and fix what isn't; we regularly learn from and recalibrate our strategies and support our grantees to do the same. We also conduct research in the field, studying the root causes of human rights abuse and the long-term impact of our work. We share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, thereby strengthening the projects we support and the movements we are helping to build.

Finally, for change to happen, the voices for justice must be loud enough for the world to hear. To raise the volume on calls for change, we promote our grantees in the media and foster their leadership on the international stage, helping bring justice and equality closer for all.

AJWS GRANTEES IN MEXICO:
A CLOSER LOOK

"They were taken alive," signs and protestors shouted during a demonstration seeking justice for the disappeared students. Photo courtesy of Tlachinollan Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña

TLACHINOLLAN CENTRO DE DERECHOS HUMANOS DE LA MONTAÑA
(Tlachinollan Human Rights Center of the Mountain)

Tlachinollan, one of the most successful advocacy organizations in Mexico,[16] helps communities seek justice in the wake of corruption and violence.

Location: Guerrero

Website: www.tlachinollan.org

Organizational budget: $536,00

AJWS Funding History: $521,055 since 2008

Awards: Abel Barrera Hernández, founder of Tlachinollan, has won awards from Amnesty International (2011) and the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (2010). In 2007, Tlachinollan won the prestigious MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

When 43 college students disappeared from Iguala, Mexico in late September 2014, the incident was just one in a long series of tragic stories. As the country's epidemic of government corruption and organized crime has escalated over the past decade, more than 26,000 people have disappeared[17]—abducted and likely murdered. Some refer to the missing victims as the "open wounds" of Mexico. Unable to trust the police or the courts to investigate these cases and seek justice, families of the missing are left wondering what really happened to their loved ones. But the families of these 43 missing students—with help from activists across the globe—have made this case into a turning point for their country. Their sorrow and outrage has unleashed a political firestorm and brought unprecedented attention to Mexico's corruption crisis.

INSISTING ON ANSWERS FOR MISSING STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

AJWS grantee Tlachinollan is at the center of this case. Upon learning of this tragedy, the organization quickly reached out to the families of the missing students and mobilized massive protests at home and abroad to pressure the Mexican government to keep searching for the students and investigate what really happened to them. "[The families] had been offered money by the military [to keep silent], but they refused," said a Tlachinollan advocate, María Luisa Aguilar. "This is not an isolated case. The reality that Iguala has shown is you will find mass graves, you will find large numbers of disappeared people in Mexico."

Worried about potential threats to the families of the missing students, Tlachinollan took immediate measures to ensure their safety during the investigation. This was a necessity given the frightening history of retaliation against human rights activists in Mexico. Tlachinollan also convinced an international human rights commission to sign an agreement with the government, guaranteeing that the investigation would include the families, Tlachinollan and other human rights organizations. They hoped that the added oversight would enable the investigation to be conducted fairly and transparently.

There are good reasons for people to mistrust the government in Mexico, and this case has revealed many of them. So far, the investigation into the missing students has uncovered close ties between the former mayor

[16] "2010: Abel Barrera Hernandez, Mexico." Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights.
[17] "Mexico: Disappearances Response Falls Short." Human Rights Watch 8 Oct. 2014.

of the town, local police and a criminal cartel. The corrupt officials allegedly worked together to kidnap the students because the students had planned a protest that would interrupt an event organized by the mayor's wife. Dozens of people have been arrested, including police and the former mayor. Without the international scrutiny that Tlachinollan and other activist groups have drawn to this case, it's unlikely these arrests would have been made.

As of January 2015, Mexico's attorney general has concluded that the missing students are dead, as charred remains believed to be theirs were discovered in a river. Their parents, advocacy groups and many in the general public remain skeptical that the students' bodies were found, however—because Mexico is home to so many missing people and unmarked graves.[18] On the date the graves were found, thousands of Mexicans took to the streets to insist on a deeper investigation. Tlachinollan continues to represent the families of the missing students as they search for the truth and try to bring the perpetrators of this tragedy to justice.

SECURING UN OVERSIGHT OF INVESTIGATIONS FOR THOUSANDS OF DISAPPEARED CITIZENS

Tlachinollan has taken its advocacy all the way to the United Nations in an effort to put an end to disappearances in Mexico. As a result of the organization's lobbying, the UN has agreed to evaluate Mexico's efforts—or lack thereof—to prevent, investigate and prosecute such cases. This historic achievement means the UN will do more to hold the Mexican government accountable for its flagrant abuse of human rights. It may take years to bring lasting change to Mexico's government and justice for the students, but Tlachinollan plans to continue its work for as long as it takes.

"The case of the missing students] has symbolized what many people are suffering with," said Abel Barrera Hernández, Tlachinollan's founder. "This is the bloody Mexico that we don't want. This is what we need to resist and confront. This is where we need to be: where the pain is, where the struggle is, where the hope is. That hope allows us to continue."

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[18]Archibold, Randal. "Mexico Officially Declares Missing Students Dead." *The New York Times* 27 Jan. 2015.

Youth call on the Mexican government to put an end to forced disappearances. Photo courtesy of Tlachinollan

PROYECTO DE DERECHOS ECONOMICOS, SOCIALES Y CULTURALES (ProDESC) Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Project

When mines strip people of their rights, activists fight back.

In 2013, Mexican police arbitrarily detained six people from an indigenous community in the northern state of Durango called La Sierrita de Galeana. The local people believe the arrests were an attempt to silence their campaign against a Canadian mining company that was mining their land without their consent. The arrests took place just days before the community members were scheduled to testify at a hearing against the mine. The people say the company, Excellon Resources, violated its contract and displaced residents. It created large and dangerous pits on their land, stripped the mountainside of forests, and contaminated the soil and water. The remaining residents couldn't grow the crops, like maguey cacti, needed for their survival, and struggled to pay the new fee they were being charged for clean water. The community says Excellon also intimidated workers and undermined their attempts to join a local mining union.

Alejandra Ancheita, the founder and director ProDESC, was honored by the Mexican Senate in April 2015 for her work as a human rights defender. Photo by Joshua Berson.

USING THE LAW TO HELP COMMUNITIES DEFEND THEMSELVES FROM DESTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT

AJWS grantee ProDESC represents La Sierrita de Galeana's case in court. In 2008, thanks to ProDESC's advocacy, Excellon signed a groundbreaking agreement with the community. They agreed to stop evicting people, sponsor projects to counteract the devastating effects of the mine, hire local workers and give scholarships to their children. The company has since failed to uphold its obligations, and ProDESC continues to seek justice for the community through protests and litigation. In 2010, with AJWS's support, ProDESC provided desperately needed resources to workers so they could organize their own union and mobilize the local community to campaign against the mining company.

ProDESC carries out similar work in several Mexican states, litigating on behalf of indigenous communities and organizing communities to advocate for themselves.

SUPPORTING AT-RISK ACTIVISTS TO STOP THREATS IN THEIR TRACKS

The organization and its founder and director, Alejandra Ancheita, have been threatened repeatedly for their work. When Alejandra visited AJWS in New York in 2014, she spoke about the efforts of some in the Mexican media to vilify her: "This article is saying I am the lawyer of the devil," she said. "The defamation campaign against me and other activists is creating public permission for violence." She believes her father was killed for doing similar work.

In 2014 Alejandra received the international Martin Ennals Award, often referred to as the Nobel Prize for human rights. AJWS, she says, "has been a key ally in achieving our vision and mission. Their uninterrupted solidarity, energy and encouragement have been vital in enabling us to carry out our work, despite the violence and threats we face."

Location: México City
Website: www.prodesc.org.mx
Organizational budget: $1,024,343
AJWS Funding History: $257,154 since 2011

COLECTIVO OAXAQUEÑO EN DEFENSA DEL TERRITORIO
(Oaxacan Collective in Defense of Territory)

When a silver mine pollutes the land, sickens a local community, and foments violence, a collective of grassroots activists in Oaxaca mobilizes activists to protect people's rights. All photographs in this story by Evan Abramson

Location: Oaxaca
Website: www.endefensadelosterritorios.org
Organizational budget: $83,500
AJWS Funding History: $333,115.00 since 2009

Rufina Sanchez, mother of murdered activist Bernardo Vasquez Sanchez, stands in front of a mural outside her home, which reads: "If you love life, fight the mine."

Bernardo Vasquez Sanchez was worried about his community. He'd grown up among the Zapotec, an indigenous group that has lived in the mountainous Oaxaca region of Mexico for thousands of years. When a Canadian silver mining company rapidly expanded operations near Bernardo's home in the small village of San Jose del Progreso, he started asking questions—and the answers were alarming. The company was diverting much of the community's scarce water to the mine and polluting local farm land. So Bernardo took action, going door to door across the valley to rally other farmers and organize opposition to the project.

PROTESTING DESTRUCTIVE MINING—WITH DEADLY CONSEQUENCES

In 2012, Bernardo was shot and killed. Locals allege that he was assassinated by supporters of the mining project to quash dissent. While his murderers remain at large, his family and members of his community have refused to give in to fear and intimidation. With support from Colectivo Oaxaqueño and other AJWS grantees, the Zapotec have joined together to continue Bernardo's work. Their rallying cry is painted on the side of his mother's home: "Si amas la vida, lucha contra la mina." *If you love life, fight the mine.*

The areas surrounding the mine now have alarming levels of pollution in the air, soil and water. Residents report that farming—the sole source of income for many Zapotec families—is no longer safe. They are convinced that the pollution has caused a sharp rise in illness and miscarriages.

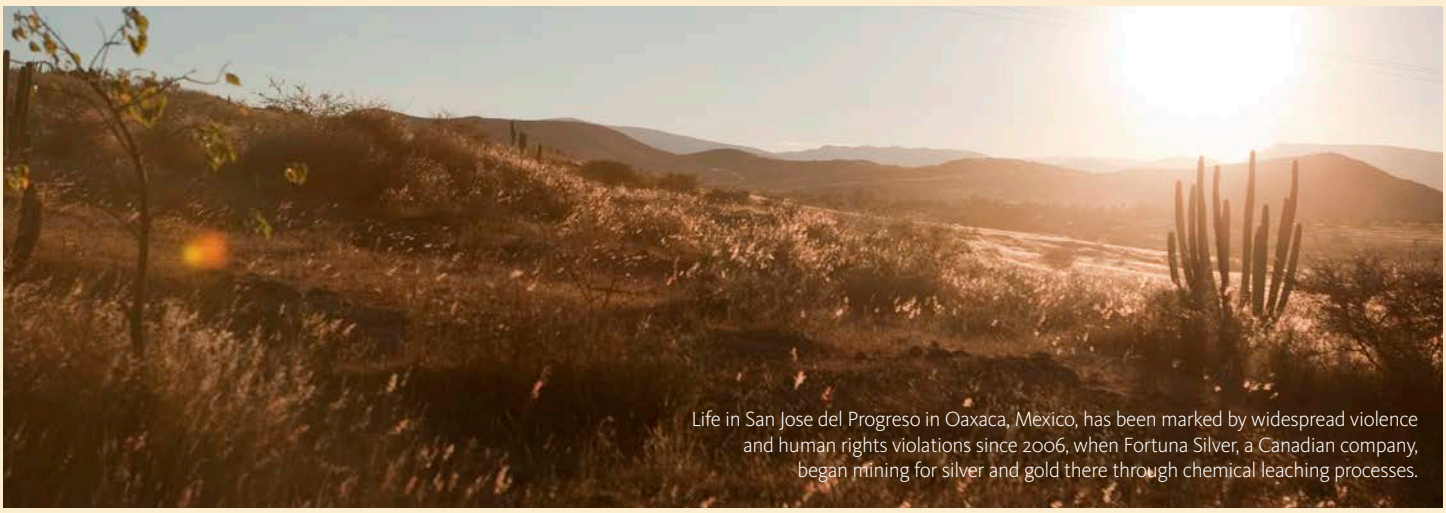
Before he died, Bernardo explained the situation to Canadian reporter Dawn Paley. He reflected on why mining contracts get government approval in Oaxaca: Officials wrongly presume that the benefit of mining jobs will outweigh the widespread damage to the land and community.

"For us, the idea of development is a battle of concepts. The government has one idea of development, and the people have another," Bernardo said. "And the people say, 'We don't want luxurious houses or luxurious cars. We need water for our crops, we need food. That's all we want.'"[18]

DOCUMENTING THE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY AND CALLING FOR CHANGE

Colectivo Oaxaqueño organizes local activist groups in Oaxaca to defend their land and water rights. Together, they have challenged the powerful mining companies and lobbied the Mexican government to end the mining contracts. Just months after Bernardo's death, Colectivo Oaxaqueño and its founding members—AJWS grantees UNOSJO, Ser Mixe, Flor y Canto and EDUCA—brought a delegation of lawmakers, journalists and activists to Oaxaca. Together, they explored how mining corporations have hurt indigenous communities, damaging their health, ruining their land for farming and creating conflicts over who can access the region's dwindling sources of clean water.

Colectivo Oaxaqueño's advocacy has brought national and international attention to the plight of the Zapotec and pressured the Mexican government to respect their rights to make decisions about their communal land. While there's still much progress to be made, towns throughout Oaxaca have started banning mining activities and contracts. Two towns have achieved an official mining ban since 2012—and with help from Colectivo Oaxaqueño, residents of San Jose del Progreso continue working to add their town to the list.



Life in San Jose del Progreso in Oaxaca, Mexico, has been marked by widespread violence and human rights violations since 2006, when Fortuna Silver, a Canadian company, began mining for silver and gold there through chemical leaching processes.

Residents believe cyanide and mercury from this open pit mine are contaminating the air and water here and in other nearby towns.

[19]"Reporter's Notebook: Fortuna Silver in Oaxaca." *Vancouver Media Co-op* 22 Feb. 2012.

AJWS grantees Colectivo Oaxaqueño, UNOSJO, Ser Mixe, EDUCA and Flor y Canto lead a "civilian observation mission" to survey and document the mine's effects and the subsequent violence, and raise international attention to the community's struggle.

Armando de la Cruz (left), a lawyer working with Colectivo Oaxaqueño, speaks with Primo Feliciano Porras Ortiz, a villager from nearby town Maguey Largo, about the events that led to the death of Bernardo Vasquez Sanchez.

Dolores Apolinia Gonzalez Ramirez points to the bullet-pocked wall near where her husband was shot over a dozen times and killed in January 2012. More than 70 bullet shells were found nearby after he died. Dolores says: "We don't want violence. All we want is for the mine to go."

Grisela Mendez Gonzalez attests that her father, Bernardo Mendez, was murdered by supporters of the mine in January 2012 while protesting the construction of a water pipe that townspeople believed was diverting the town's water supply to the mine.

Ester Porres with her baby son Esteban and daughters Hadassa and Rebeca Stefania (left to right) in Maguey Largo. In the last two years, more than 8 percent of women in Maguey Largo have experienced late-term miscarriages. The community believes pollution from the mine is to blame.

AJWS grantees Colectivo Oaxaqueño, UNOSJO, EDUCA and Flor y Canto, along with members of various international human rights organizations, present their findings to the Oaxacan government. They continue to call for justice and an end to both the mining and the violence it has brought into these communities.

CENTRO DE DERECHOS INDIGENAS FLOR Y CANTO
(Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights)

Indigenous farmers win a landmark victory that ensures their survival in Oaxaca.

Indigenous people have lived in Oaxaca's Central Valleys for thousands of years, sustaining themselves in this drought-prone region using traditional farming practices. Until recently, the communities managed their own water. They lived sustainably, digging wells that tapped into natural aquifers, and in times of drought, conserving water until the wells refilled.

Location: Oaxaca
Website: www.cdiflorycanto.wordpress.com
Organizational budget: $138,000
AJWS Funding History: $442,789.94 since 2008
AJWS was Flor y Canto's first long-time donor.

In 2006, Mexico's national water authority, CONAGUA, interfered with this delicate balance by restricting indigenous communities' use of water from the wells and overcharging them for it. The farmers couldn't afford to pay the government's high rates, and as a result, their crops suffered. Moreover, while local people's farms withered, they saw the government provide ample water to nearby industrial farms, tourist hotels and mines—all projects that stood to benefit more privileged sectors.

EMPOWERING FARMERS TO STOP WATER THEFT AND PURSUE JUSTICE IN THE COURTS

Flor y Canto, an AJWS grantee that was helping the local indigenous farmers advocate for their water rights, intervened to sue CONAGUA—and in 2013, it won the case. The municipal tribunal ruled that the water commission must consult with the farmers and give them a say in how water resources are allocated. It was a landmark victory—the first time anyone had sued this powerful body, the first time CONAGUA had been made accountable to follow the law on indigenous rights, and the first time nationwide that a governmental institution had recognized those rights.

The case hinged on the Mexican constitution's directive that a community has the right to give or withhold its consent to proposed projects that may affect the lands they own, occupy or use. With AJWS's support, the organization has not only held the government accountable to this law, but it has also trained hundreds of local people to know the law and stand up to their government. They formed what they called the Alliance of Agrarian and Municipal Authorities for the Defense and the Protection of Water to help them negotiate for their land and water rights in the future.

Unfortunately, Flor y Canto's victory came with a price: The organization received threats throughout the case and, in 2012, a community activist was murdered. But the community held its ground, and Flor y Canto and the people are now negotiating the community's role in making decisions moving forward. Today, communities all over Mexico are reaching out to Flory y Canto for guidance about how they can bring similar lawsuits.

RESTORING THE BALANCE OF THE LAND THROUGH INNOVATIVE WATER CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES

While they pursued justice in the courts, Flor y Canto and the farmers worked to bring the local farms back to life. They restored ancestral methods of managing the natural water sources and created new techniques for combatting the effects of the dry season. They have strengthened natural aquifers and increased the water levels of communal wells, demonstrating how effectively indigenous people manage their own natural resources.

The people now refer to the indigenous farmers and Flor y Canto as the "sowers of water."

Irene Martinez Gonzalez has saved her family farm with support from Flor y Canto. In a region where commercial farming, mining and tourism are sapping the local water supply and forcing small farmers off their land, the organization supports indigenous people's advocacy for their water rights. Photo by Evan Abramson

UNION DE ORGANIZACIONES DE LA SIERRA JUAREZ, OAXACA
UNION OF SIERRA JUAREZ, OAXACA ORGANIZATIONS (UNOSJO)

Land rights activists empowering indigenous communities to shape their own futures through legislative leadership.

Indigenous people constitute 15 percent of Mexico's population, but they are severely under-represented in local and national politics. While indigenous communities appoint their own leaders and organize their own governance structures, the Mexican government frequently denies them any official authority and often deliberately excludes them from decisions that affect them—such as plans to develop their communities' land and natural resources.

This practice violates the UN's 2007 Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which promises indigenous people the right to maintain distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions of their own, while also participating fully in the politics and affairs of the state.

Indigenous women, in particular, grapple with additional disadvantages because of their gender. While many indigenous groups struggle to be heard within the broader Mexican society, indigenous women struggle against cultural norms in indigenous communities that muffle women's voices and stand in their way of attaining influence and leadership. Many indigenous women also face violence and abuse from an array of people, ranging from their partners to military officials.

GIVING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES A VOICE IN LOCAL POLITICS

AJWS grantee Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca (UNOSJO)—a collective of more than 15 community organizations throughout the Sierra Juarez region—works to overcome these barriers to leadership and political participation by indigenous people and women.

This collective transformed the political landscape in the municipality of Santiago Camotlan in Oaxaca. The government had excluded the villagers from politics and denied them representation. To rectify this, UNOSJO helped the town form its own governing council and elect indigenous community members into office. UNOSJO also recently formed a political forum called Campesina Women, to support indigenous women to understand their voting rights and organize others for social change.

With its newfound power and UNOSJO's support, the Oaxacan indigenous community has tackled an array of issues. For instance, UNOSJO helped halt mass production of genetically-modified (GMO) corn in Oaxaca, which has hurt struggling local farmers who grow and sell traditional corn. UNOSJO collaborated with other organizations to launch a national movement for farmers' rights through a groundbreaking campaign with the slogan "sin maiz, no hay pais" (without corn, there is no country). In 2013, UNOSJO and its partners brought a class-action lawsuit against the federal government, which resulted in the government issuing a temporary countrywide ban on GMO corn.

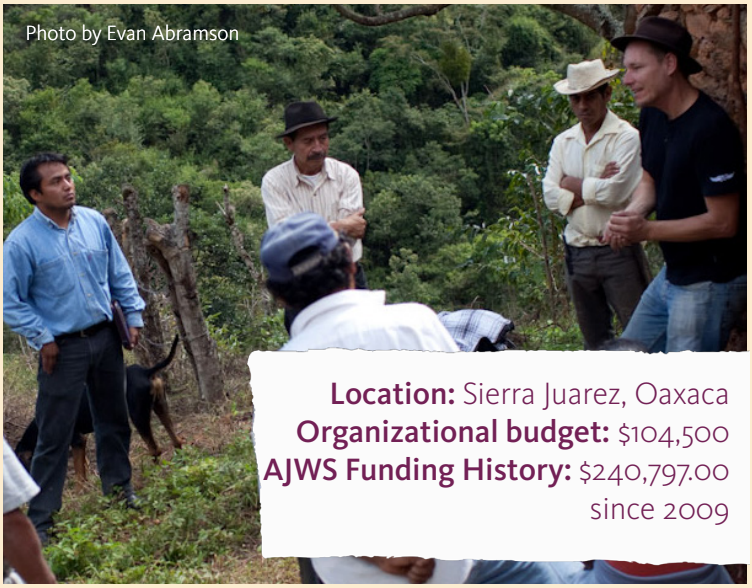


Photo by Evan Abramson

Location: Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca
Organizational budget: $104,500
AJWS Funding History: $240,797.00 since 2009

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