The Huasteca Indigenous Profile

1. The Huasteca region is a region in the northern reaches of the Gulf of Mexico where the Sierra Madre mountain range meets the coastal plain of the Gulf. This is considered a rich agricultural region with an abundance of water from the riverine system flowing to the Gulf. There are also petroleum reserves in the "Canal Delta of Chicontepec" that have not been exploited. Although rich agriculturally, it is also a region of frequent natural disasters—freezing rains, hail, cyclones, floods, and unpredictable storms.

2. The region has a high concentration of indigenous people of the Teenek (Huasteco), Nahua, Pame, Otami, and Tepehuan ethnicities/language families (40.8% of the total population of the zone). The Teenek are a prehistoric group that developed a sophisticated civilization in the pre-colonial times, influencing the art and technology of the Aztec kings, before its decline. There are cultural similarities between the three ethnicities, but they maintain distinct languages and settle in separate communities or village areas. The indigenous populations are much poorer than those surrounding them. Land reform was carried out in the 1980s in this zone, with the result than many indigenous farmers have only recently become landowners after generations of working on landed estates, and farmer organizations have only recently changed from advocates of land reform to productive organizations seeking economic improvements.

3. The main findings of the study are:

> lack of recognition of government authorities of the region’s cultural differences
> lack of coverage of infrastructure and services with health and literacy problems
> strong persistence of traditional forms of governance even in some of the areas of private land holdings which were areas of land redistribution
> high productivity in some areas but high climate risk and market control by intermediaries
> strong role of women in production and community organization although no roles in the formal political system
> a history of dispersed political organization, with uncoordinated action and little ability until now to create regional organizations that serve the needs of development and economic improvement

> disconnect of government programs that dissolve social capital rather than helping to strengthen it.

4. History. The Huasteca has had a peculiar history for the presence of a large number of leaders and opportunists in the region during and after the Mexican revolution, many of whom established ranches and farms during this period with very extensive livestock holdings. Because of their political influence in national politics, these ranches were not touched during any of the land reform movements.

5. For this study, the Huasteca has been defined as 55 municipalities in San Luis Potosi, Veracruz and Hidalgo, without including Puebla, Tamaulipas or Querétaro. There are many different classifications in use for the Huasteca, ranging in coverage from 39 (SEDESOL figures) to 76 (COPLAMAR) to 83 (CONAPO). Of the 55, 28 are in Veracruz, 19 en San Luis Potosi, and 8 in Hidalgo. Within the 55 included in the study, the indigenous population of the Huasteca region is 1,575,078, of which 76% are Nahuatl and 21.24% are Teenek, with other language speakers each making up less than 1% each.

6. There are five sub-regions, which define the range of economic activities and opportunities: high sierra, middle sierra, low sierra and valley lands, and the coastal plains.

7. One problem with the above classification is that within many municipalities, different localities pertain to different subzones. The resulting summary information for environment or agricultural statistic purposes tends to mix communities that have different ecological/altitudinal characteristics and quite different productive systems.

8. The majority of indigenous farmers are small scale agriculturalists producing both basic grains and a variety of commercial crops, many in the homegardens near their homesteads, including citrus fruits, coffee, sugar cane, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. The production in non-natural disaster years is generally very good, but the main problems stem from the uncertainty of the crop and the traditional control of markets by outsiders. Huasteca is famous for the low prices paid to producers by intermediaries, while the region as a whole has a great prosperity. For lack of cash, farmers are reliant on the processing industries for working capital for their farm or on intermediaries who extract
a large share of the profits for perishables. As yet, the indigenous producer organizations formed since the land reform have not been able to create a strong market niche.

9. There is a strong persistence of the traditional belief system about the agricultural cycle and its link to the cosmos. There is a detailed and strict agricultural/religious calendar and traditional spiritual leaders and shamans are strict about its application in the community. This affects migration cycles, planting and harvesting times, and the ritual festival calendar, as well as creating traditional frictions with the Catholic Church.

10. Land tenure systems vary considerably in the Huasteca region. In Hidalgo, 77% of the land is ejido (220) or community (20) tenure. San Luis Potosi has 49% in communal tenure of which 43% are ejidos and the rest indigenous communities. Most of the land in Veracruz, by contrast, is private holdings. For the whole region, communal forms of tenure make up 27% of the holdings and private tenure the remaining 73%. The majority of the communal tenure areas are small as the indigenous groups prefer to live in dispersed communities.

11. Daily labor outside the community is an ever-increasing strategy to sustain families with growing demands for cash for consumption goods and investment capital for the farm. The type of work selected and destination depends on the resource base of the family—landed families tend to work within the same region and only for limited months of the year, while landless become "swallows" and follow the harvest from crop to crop in many geographic regions. Despite the 1980s land reform, which divided large estate lands among the indigenous communities as private parcels or ejido extensions (new population centers), many indigenous people continue to work as labor on large landholdings. Large farmers respect the efficiency of indigenous workers and find them particularly skilled at livestock rearing, orange or cane harvesting (for the more hardpressed workers) or vegetable harvesting in Tamaulipas. Landed laborers migrate around religious festivals and agricultural seasons. Much of the migration is through collective arrangements whereby a "boss" organizes a group of indigenous people from nearby communities, arranges the timing of their absence with the community leaders, helps negotiate local festival timings to coincide with their absence, and helps ensure their well-being in their place of employment.

12. Indigenous languages in the Huasteca have evolved during the last three decades whereby more speakers are bilingual than monolingual, although there are distributional differences by state, geographic areas, obviously with monolinguism concentrated in the more isolated pockets and municipalities. In the Hidalgo Huasteca monolingual speakers
are 25% of the indigenous population, while in San Luis Potosi and Veracruz the percentages are 10.7 and 12.2% monolingual population.

[ Indigenous Governance ]

13. One characteristic of the indigenous region of Huasteca is the continued existence and vigor of the local customary systems of governance. Historically, these forms of government were the main internal governance system in the indigenous areas. They have persisted post-independence and into modern times because they have been a key element in the strategy of resistance, and because, the system and elements of communal labor sharing and responsibilities have provided community with services and a network of communications that would otherwise not exist. Like other indigenous communities, the Huasteca indigenous groups maintain a cargo system with a series of obligatory community posts for community services.

14. The reaction to the opportunities of financing from government programs has been to overlay a complicated system of committees and committee responsibilities onto the traditional system of cargos. Given the small size of the communities (100-500 adult members), this results in a heavy burden on indigenous adults to fulfill their duties in these positions, as well as a dispersion of organizational efforts into a number of unlinked activities, with no synergy of effort. The typical community with access to government funds has developed a minimum of 11 committees to access DIF, SEP, CONAFE, SSA, SEDESOL-Solidarity, SEDESOL-Credit, SEDESOL-Children of Solidarity, SEDESOL-Housing, SEDESOL-Women in Solidarity, SAGAR Firco, SAGAR-Forestry restoration, and the church committee, each with four officer positions. In addition this community has at least 18 traditional formal positions in the assembly and sub-assemblies that are part of the structure of the ejidos or communities in the region. The interviews show a strong sectoral attitude of the various government agencies—not only is these agencies unaware of the confusion and dispersion of efforts, but they are also unable to conceive of the possibility of alternatives. For example, a common response is, "How would we assure an adequate allocation of funds, if there is not a clear line of responsibility for this program and a clear set of leaders for this particular program".

15. Women play an important role in the economy and the community. Based on their domestic roles and strong inputs into the homegarden production, they have organized women’s groups that take responsibility for education, health, and alternative income strategies. Some of the microregions in San Luis and Hidalgo have women’s groups that have been in continuous existence for more than 100 years. The promoters who come from government agencies to assist development tend to be completely ignorant of these
organizations and attempt to "inform" women of the potential ways to promote development, rather than studying and building upon these very strong existing organizations.

[ Education ]

16. While generally more educated than in the other regions studied in the profiles, the Huasteca also has high levels of illiteracy and drop-out rates. Compared to a national average of 12%, 22% of the adults over 15 years of age are illiterate. There has been an effective initiation of a bilingual program in the Huasteca due to the predominance of Nahuatl speakers in the INI bilingual programs, but the program is less effective for the Pame and Teenek and Otami speakers, where few of the teachers or their supervisors know how to read or write in the local languages. There are not clear figures on the drop-out rates, due to the dispersion of statistics across states and municipalities, where indigenous characteristics tend to be lost.