

The Community Police is a community justice project in Guerrero's southern Sierra Costa region in Mexico. It is the product of a long social struggle and is in no way affiliated with the Mexican government. The Community Police is based on the concept of collective work, known as *tequio* or *faena*, which, together with the traditional guards, has existed since ancient times in the cultures which inhabit what is now known as Mexico.



These traditional practices have nothing to do with the present-day concepts of public security, rule of law, or legality under the capitalist judicial system. The most profound difference lies in the concept of community justice and being a community's guardian. In Mexico's ancient cultures, the "warriors" or traditional guards had the additional obligation to protect their communities, to be a guide of justice for them. This justice doesn't just mean to punish those who commit crimes against others; rather, justice is holistic and involves watching over health, education, and other

community needs. This means that the only guarantee of justice is well-being and balance for the whole community. On the other hand, the capitalist system's concept of public security or justice is selling security in order to protect the material interests of the few that have more economic possessions against an immense majority that doesn't have them, and to contain the discontent and the problems that derive from this unjust distribution of wealth in the world.

The Council of Indigenous Authorities (CAIN in its Spanish initials) was founded in Santa Cruz del Rincón, Guerrero, in February 1994, and its objective is to watch over the well-being of the community, owed to the fact that neither the state nor the federal government do so. To achieve this well-being they decided to undertake projects in different areas such as: communication, health, education, security, and an Indigenous Training Coordination Center. Within the area of communication they completed the construction of a stretch of highway between the communities, and there's still many more stretches to construct. But it's in the realm of security where the Community Police were born in 1995, after a series of assemblies between diverse organizations from the region such as coffee-growing organizations, the Ejido (communal land) Union, Luz de la Montaña, the Regional Farmers Union, 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance, Triple S, the Abasto Community Center, CAIN, and the Santa Cruz de del Rincón and Pascala del Oro parishes.

This project was born from public assemblies because animal theft, assaults, and sexual abuse of women became intolerable. Sexual abuse was the most painful for the communities, and one particularly unbearable case was that of a 7-year-old girl. The public security forces only carried out operations that bothered the communities more than they provided them with security. To resolve the assault problem, for example, the local police would ask the victims for money, which they said was for gasoline. So extortion, arrogance, abuse of authority, inefficiency on the part of the governmental authorities, and at times their collaboration with criminals all led this region's inhabitants to back the Community Police.



Each officer that joins the Community Police is elected in an Assembly. The community meets, and if the prerequisites established by the community are met, they elect eight community police in the larger communities, six in the mid-sized communities, and four in the smallest communities. Likewise, if it is necessary to remove an officer from duty it is also done in an Assembly. (The state police, on the other hand, are subject to the laws of supply and demand, meaning that if the system needs more police to protect their interests then a lot of them are hired, and if not then they're laid off.)

Community Police do not receive money nor any other personal benefit from their community service. And each one of them has an occupation through which they sustain themselves and their families (generally they work the land). Their service rotates so that a person can work

their land or occupation, and when they're elected to serve in the Community Police they don't have to abandon their livelihoods. This means that each police officer is a part of the community that for a couple of days out of the year calls upon him to provide security, and for the rest of the year he is protected by other *compañeros* like himself.

The Community Police has a presence in 56 communities in ten municipalities in the Costa Chica and la Montaña regions of Guerrero. In its twelve years of existence, it has succeeded in making these communities one of the safest areas in the state. It has the complete backing of the people and the community assemblies, who have on various occasions had to undertake marches and mobilizations so that the state and federal government would respect the Community Police.

Community Justice

After a while the communities realized that it didn't work to detain delinquents and deliver them to government jails because after a while the state justice system would free them, and they would go back to committing crimes. Faced with this situation, the assembly took initiative and tried to jog its collective memory about how justice was practiced by their ancestors. They recalled that, for example, if someone stole a bull and was apprehended, they were marched through the community along with a parade of people who threw firecrackers and a band that played music. This caused people to think long and hard before committing a crime. So when the first Council of Indigenous Authorities met on January 22, 1998, in Potrerillos Cuipanole, it was to administer justice in the traditional way. Now the Regional Coordinating Committee of the Community Authorities (CRAC in its Spanish initials) is in charge of administering justice in the communities where the Community Police has a presence.

Within this concept community justice it is understood that when someone disrespects or hurts another person, they haven't just offended that person; they've disrespected or hurt the whole community. Therefore, to be able to make amends for this offense it's necessary to work for the benefit of the whole community and not only for the person who was hurt. The offender isn't thought of as an enemy who needs to be driven away or isolated, but rather as someone who has committed a grave error and can in some way try to make amends and return to being part of the community.



To be able to make amends to the community a period of community service is undertaken—repairing or constructing roads, schools, or hospitals, for example—according to what the community needs. The duration of the community service depends on the seriousness of the offense and can range from three months to a couple of years. This process is called "re-education."

Re-education does not mean depriving a harmful person of their freedom or isolating them from society; it means a period in which in addition to community service, there is also time for personal reflection and analysis. Each person has to think about their values and how they will conduct themselves in the future. This period of reflection is supported by the community and the community authorities through constant conversations with those who are in the process of re-education. There have been cases where the person who is in a period of re-education was the only breadwinner in their family. In these instances the community helps the family by giving them beans and corn.

The responsibility to administer justice doesn't only lie in the CRAC's hands. Local problems are resolved in local community assemblies, and only when it's of a serious nature or at the regional level does the problem go to the CRAC. Moreover, the discretion given to the CRAC has been consensed upon in community assemblies.

Autonomy

To understand the processes of autonomy in Mexico it's necessary to be clear that autonomy is not new to these lands. Indigenous communities have a long history of autonomy with their own languages, medicines, and foods, as well as the social and political organization of their communities. Imperialists have tried to destroy this community-based way of understanding social organization—independent and autonomous but always working together—with wars of conquest and massacres of indigenous people that have been happening for more than 515 years.

Autonomous community justice projects like the Community Police in Guerrero or the Zapatistas' Good Government Councils in Chiapas have begun to reclaim this ancestral autonomy, and entire generations have been raised within these experiences. It's very different to try to construct something new and unexplored like autonomy in social organization than to reclaim what once existed. In Oaxaca they still practice the tradition of the *Topiles* or traditional guards, and some of the Yaqui tribes in Sonora also maintain traditional guards. Although not all of them are part of autonomous movements, through their actions they maintain the self-management that the War of Conquest hasn't been able to exterminate.

But it's also necessary to understand that different forms of autonomy exist. The Community Police and the CRAC are adherents to the Zapatistas' Other Campaign, and in April 2006 they met with the Sixth Commission. While the Zapatista *caracoles* (centers of government) have

achieved autonomy without having to make treaties or initiate dialogs with the government, the Community Police established a relationship with the state from the very beginning so that the state would respect the project. Throughout its history the Community Police has had different relationships with the state, depending on who is governing at the moment. For example, on a couple of occasions the government has given them weapons, a vehicle, or a house for the indigenous authorities to use in the administration of community justice. However, this "support" is completely insufficient—after all, there are now 672 community police officers who need communication equipment, vehicles, and infrastructure. On various occasions the community has worked together to meet these needs. Their organization is working towards establishing autonomy from the state in many other areas such as education, the economy, and health. Recuperating this autonomy is difficult for Mexican indigenous communities because it is necessary to confront the nation-state and the global capitalist system, but in a way they've already walked this path and are familiar with the experience of being autonomous. Even though those who are now trying to reclaim their self-determination in their lands and territory may not have lived these experiences of autonomy in the flesh, it is a history that they carry in their hearts and collective memory.

The great advances in autonomy that the Community Police and the CRAC have achieved can't be doubted. The same goes for other important projects in Mexico such as the Zirahuen community's Efen Capiz Secondary School in Michoacan. Even though the teachers are paid by the government, this school continues to be in the hands of its community. The community is working to form the Blue Lake Eruption in Rebellion Caracol of Zirahuen, clearly connected to the Zapatista struggle. Therefore it is crucial to understand that the autonomous processes within communities will always be different. Although in some cases, like the Zapatista caracoles, it appears easy to not have relations with the state, in many others it's not so simple. But this does not mean that they are not equally valuable for analyzing these experiences in the anti-capitalist struggle.

Furthermore, in order to be able to try autonomous projects in our neighborhoods, streets, cities, or communities it's necessary to understand that the power to have total autonomy from the state is not always possible in the beginning due to various factors. These factors are in many cases economic and infrastructural. For example, while Zapatista caracoles have received a lot of international solidarity in support of their economic, productive, education, and health projects, many other communities and struggles don't. They see themselves as forced to demand that the government build these projects although in essence these communities run them, and always do so with consequences such as political prisoners or assassinations. For example, arrest warrants have been hanging over the heads of various members of the Community Police and community activists and it appears as though the government now wants to act on them. [Translator's note: In Mexico the government issues warrants against activists for petty crimes they may or may not have committed and then shelves the warrants for years, allowing them to pile up until they can be used at an opportune moment, such as during an uprising or when a community organization becomes too effective. Right after the uprising in Oaxaca began, for example, warrants issued years ago against APPO and Section 22 activists were dusted off to legally sanction their politically motivated arrests.] During its first years in existence the Community Police was disarmed by the Mexican Army and some of its members were jailed, and it was only through social mobilization that the government respected the will of the people.

An Example of Dignity

Indigenous resistance struggles have put forward some very clear and simple concepts, for example, in the First Encuentro of American Indigenous Peoples or through the Zapatista's Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle and the National Indigenous Congress. These concepts like respect and dignity are easy to translate to western languages, but they're difficult to understand. Respect doesn't only mean not offending or not attacking something or someone. Rather, it involves understanding one another and understanding that we're not all alike and that we don't have to be alike to be able to live in peace.

The concept of dignity is far from that which our capitalist society puts forth when it tries to sell you a "dignified life" in a "good house," with a "good job" that pays a "good salary" and a well-being that most of the time only applies to yourself or your family. The dignity that indigenous people talk about is knowing that no one is suffering for our own well-being and knowing that our actions are carried out with collective justice. Dignity is always feeling happy with our lives and wanting our communities to feel that same happiness, and that whatever injustice, wherever it is committed, is an injustice to all of us, and we won't continue to be dignified if we don't struggle to end these injustices.

Only if we can understand these concepts, even just a little, will we be able to see and understand the profoundness and importance of the motto of the Community Police, "Respect for our rights is justice," and what this dignified project means for the global struggle against the capitalist system.

For more information on the Community Police in English and Spanish, please see www.policiacomunitaria.org.

Puaz works with Regeneracion Radio, an independent community radio station in Mexico City. Their articles and broadcasts about the Zapatistas' Other Campaign and the struggle in Mexico can be found at www.regeneracionradio.org.

*Translation by Kristin Bricker. This article is also available in the original **Spanish**.*