

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN AQUILES SERDÁN, MÉXICO: THE EXPERIENCE OF CENESO

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Introduction

This experience took place in Aquiles Serdán, which is one of 67 municipalities in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. In February 2013, 410 grassroots women from Aquiles Serdán participated in an initiative supported by the Huairou Commission. They signed an agreement with the municipal authorities to put an end to violence against women and move one step closer to creating safer cities for women, girls, and their communities. Out of this context the Centre for Women's Solidarity Economy (CENESO) was born.

Socio-economic context

The majority of the population employed in Chihuahua earns only a minimum wage (which varies by region). Approximately 45% of working women are earning minimum wage, an income level considered precarious. In addition, 5% of entrepreneurs in the state are men, while only 1% are women. By comparison, the national average is 2.2% for women (more than double than the state's percentage) and 5% for men - the same as the state. This indicates a gender gap in entrepreneurship.

Another problem that the project sought to address was the issue of violence against women. Aquiles Serdán has become, in recent years, a conurbation to the Municipality of Chihuahua, which has one of the highest rates of violence and crime in the state and in the country. For example, in 2010 the city of Chihuahua ranked third nationally in the number of female homicides committed. Chihuahua also ranked first in the country in 2010 for injuries caused by family violence. The victim was female in 93.6% of cases, whereas the national average was only 12% (CONAVIM 2012). In Aquiles Serdán, as a result of this conurbation, the problem of violence against women has worsened, with an increase in the rate of female homicides and other kinds of violence.

Vision and purpose of the project

For CENESO, strengthening community organization and the self-directed participation of grassroots women in meeting their local development goals is of fundamental importance.

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Economic autonomy is a critical means for women who have been the victims of violence to end the cycle of violence in their lives through developing behaviours that support violence prevention.

Given this vision, the objective of CENESO is to support women's economic empowerment through the implementation of a Centre for Women's Solidarity Economy (CENESO). CENESO engages in capacity building for productive projects that 1) promote local sustainable community development, 2) explore labour options for women that support their productive and reproductive work (at home and in the community), and 3) support the construction of Safe Cities.

Main Actors

The main actors in the experience were grassroots women from Aquiles Serdán and the surrounding municipalities; the mayor of Aquiles Serdán; the state government's *Popular and Solidarity-based Economy Networks* program; the Care Center for Working Women from Chihuahua CSO; and the Bureau of Interdisciplinary Studies CSO (BEI).

The project was carried out by BEI¹, which received seed-capital from the National Institute of Social Development's Program for Joint Social Investment, under the Call for Strengthening Gender Equality and Equity.

¹ The Bureau of Interdisciplinary Studies CSO is an organization that seeks to contribute to the construction of a more democratic, inclusive and productive Mexico through multidisciplinary research and study. For more information, visit www.bufeteestudios.org.



Firma de Acta Constitutiva del Centro de Negocios en
Economía Solidaria para Mujeres del Municipio de
Aguiles Serdán, Chihuahua
Enero de 2014

January 2014: Signing of the Agreement that creates CENESO.

The seed money was used to develop skills for women in the 10 municipalities that participated in the experience, and to procure equipment for the centre's operations. The project also had the support of the municipality, through its in-kind contribution of CENESO's physical space. The State Government Program "Popular Solidarity Economy Networks" (REDES) and Care Centre for Working Women also supported the project and were present throughout the intervention.

The direct beneficiaries of the experience were 423 grassroots women living in poverty, marginalization, vulnerability and exclusion, in Aquiles Serdán and in other municipalities.

Design of CENESO in Aquiles Serdán

The CENESO in Aquiles Serdán was designed with a vision of becoming an innovative tool for effective social action at the local level. The grassroots women participating in the experience, through participatory processes, analyzed the Community Business Centre model and made relevant changes and adjustments to the design of their centre, given their unique needs and objectives. In designing the CENESO, they agreed that they wanted it to become a centre that could empower women economically, socially, culturally and politically.

The women learned about and systematized the legal and regulatory frameworks that would sustain the Centre as well as the financial and non-financial services that they could access. It was designed as an association that could provide financial and non-financial services with a

focus on women, young people, and children of both sexes looking to undertake productive projects for their economic empowerment, including solidarity-based enterprises operating cooperatively with local economic development.

The non-financial services that the Centre provides include: training and capacity building, technical assistance, legal assistance, marketing, technological development, production, organization, advocacy and networking, a job bank, and trade center. The financial services include: training in savings and loans, credit, insurance, and financing. The Center is designed to provide technical assistance and to accompany its members in these services.

Grassroots women from Aquiles Serdán, in designing their CENESO, determined that the training offered at the center would not be limited to productive projects. Rather, it would extend to political, organizational, social, and cultural fields, with a focus on how to carry out high quality activities.

Moreover, the CENESO was designed to forge linkages with other stakeholders that could support the development and strengthening of the CENESO, including: the Government, through economic development programs, tax incentives, relevant legal and programmatic frameworks, and curricula design in basic education and entrepreneurial training; the Business Sector, through support with building networks and sharing best practices; Academia, through providing technical assistance with information systems, product design, labels, packaging, etc.; community organizations, through training, partnerships, and networks creation; and finally: international agencies, through technical assistance, exchange of experiences and access to best practices.

In January 2014, CENESO's Constitution was signed, with the Mayor, the president of the Municipality's Integrated Family Development System, the head of REDES for the state of Chihuahua, a representative from the Care Centre for Working Women of Chihuahua, and a representative from the BEI, all participating as witnesses. More than a hundred women, as well as various state and local authorities, also attended the ceremony. CENESO is the first business centre for the solidarity economy directed at women in the country. It began in a 100 square meter space, equipped with computer equipment, the necessary software, a video projector, printers, and basic operational materials. It was adapted to contain meeting spaces for training, lectures and for serving customers and suppliers. It includes an entrepreneurs' corner for youth and children, as well as a childcare area, so that women with children can attend the various meetings and trainings in the centre.

The centre is currently operating, with enough tools and staff training to begin working for grassroots women in the municipality of Aquiles Serdán.



Ceremonial ribbon cutting at the inauguration of CENESO.

Tools employed by CENESO

Safety Audits

Safety Audits² were conducted in the localities that surround the twelve Community Development Centres of Aquiles Serdán. This formed part of an exercise analyzing the security of the city by evaluating public places, municipal facilities, bus stops, transportation systems, etc. The purpose of the audits was to detect risks that could affect the safety of women and people in general as they pass through public spaces, as well as the potential profitability of productive projects. The Safety Audits sought to increase crime prevention and allow for optimal planning of production projects.

The Safety Audit reports were delivered to the state's Department of Community Development and the municipality's Directorate of Comprehensive Development. The authorities were asked to develop specific preventive and corrective actions to address issues of insecurity, such as establishing municipal police patrols, checking abandoned houses, and cleaning vacant lots, as these were potential sources for crime.

Women formed committees, led by the coordinators of the community centres, to follow up with the authorities about their requests. In response, the mayor's office launched a joint task force

² Women's Safety Audits are a tool promoted by organizations such as UN-Habitat. See: <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=2847>

between the municipality's staff and the community members. Both parties decided that the first stage of this joint action would be a deep cleaning in the area. For three months, women, accompanied by the authorities, went street-by-street inviting people to help cleaning. Together, they cleaned abandoned houses, vacant lots, and streets. One woman recalled: "I cleaned houses, took out the trash, removed the grass and swept the streets of litter that we removed into the drums, which were scattered where the trucks collect the garbage."

Cleaning emerged as a joint effort of voluntary work by women and involvement from the Government. When the municipality realized the benefits of such cleaning, they awarded more resources to the project such as paint, brooms, and detergent, and took the cleaning inspection process to places like public schools. However, it should be noted that the commitment of government authorities for these initiatives was not *a priori*.

With the experience they gained as part of this popular urban movement, the grassroots women are beginning to develop their community leadership skills. The goal is for such leadership to become an effective tool for advancing women's demands.

During the Safety Audits, in addition to analyzing the security of the city, participants also assessed land-use management and what would be needed to pursue inclusive urban development. One woman commented: "Now we do Safety Audits because we feel responsible for ensuring security and because we want to find out what people need. For example, they tell us: 'We need tortilla factories or bakeries, pharmacies, because there isn't one close by'. For many women, the process of community mapping has been very useful for identifying the needs of the people as well as possible niche markets.

Workshops

Introductory workshops on social and solidarity economy were held with the purpose of enabling participants to learn and reflect on the principles of social economy, its benefits, and what is required to start or further develop productive projects in self-sustaining and solidarity-based women-owned businesses. Similarly, workshops were conducted with the purpose of enabling women to engage in a participatory approach to for designing and creating a CENESO and its operation manual, ensuring that the project be operated by project beneficiaries. The contents of these workshops sought to revolve around a thematic cluster, touching on the design, creation and operation of the CENESO from an integrated vision, with a gender perspective.

Grassroots Academy

165 women participated in the Grassroots Academy conducted in the Aquiles Serdán experience: 127 belonged to eight municipalities in the State of Chihuahua, and 38 women were from the Aquiles Serdán Municipality. Its implementation was considered strategic for the achievement of the project's long-range goals: to disseminate the project, and to generate peer exchanges. This academy was crucial for generating synergy and social cohesion among women from grassroots organizations in Aquiles Serdan and other municipalities in the State of Chihuahua. Ninety-eight percent of participants in the workshops expressed an interest in starting their own business, even if they had were already employed.

Local-to-Local Dialogues

Part of the strategy for ensuring the success of the CENESO was to establish Local-to-Local Dialogues, where grassroots women engaged in conversations with local authorities to negotiate a variety of development themes that incorporate the priorities of women. At this early stage of the project, the Local-to-Local dialogues have already borne fruit in many ways and have garnered commitments of support from multiple levels of government that will continue to promote the project.

Project Results

Capacity building

The women in charge of the CENESO have informed us that the main services they have focused on in this first stage have been training – on the administration solidarity-based economy business administration, and trade skills such as baking craft-making – and providing information about local, state and federal programs related to productive projects from which women can benefit.

The training offered in administration of social economy businesses lasts three months and includes topics such as economics, equipment and business management, financing cost analysis, and market research. In the workshop, the women entrepreneurs calculate the cost of their projects, analyze their financing options, and verify the viability of their business location, , among other topics.

Training has been ongoing. CENESO members organize themselves and request training; for example, last July, at least 25 women heads of households looking to start or consolidate their business received this training in the CENESO facilities, with support from the state government's Department of Community and Social Development and from the Care Center for Working Women in Chihuahua. The Care Center also provides resources to continue supporting women in training and education. CENESO members are also aware that they will continue doing volunteer work to continue to empower women as they join the CENESO. This link that has been made among CENESO, government and civil society is one of the components that allow the process of training and education to continue successfully.

Several women interviewed expressed how the training provided in the CENESO has borne fruit.

One woman talked about her learning around the social economy and its advantages:

One feels better if there is a sharing of benefits. We have learned to be supportive and help others. Here we are all equal. If someone is missing something, we help, we share. For example, if one person sells tortillas, another tamales, another a different item, then we buy from each other.

Moreover, the community mapping of all existing productive enterprises carried out during the Safety Audits helped them to discover niche markets: "There is no gift shop here, nor a store that sells plates, or disposable cups. There are no shoe stores or pharmacies, or stationery shops. It occurred to me that I could open a mobile stationery shop, and sell outside of the school."

Some challenges still remain regarding capacity building among the women. For example, in the initial workshops, many women learned about computers and how to use them. While the CENESO has computer equipment, it is necessary to continue with the training process so that the women can fully embrace information and communication technologies (ICT's). One woman mentioned: "The problem is that we do not know how to use the current computers, and we need assistance". Women reported the need for more computer training and simpler software that could facilitate their learning.

Next Steps

Environmental focus

The training thus far has been more focused on improving the entrepreneurial capacity of women. The intention for next year is to put more emphasis on the environment and on the backyard-economy (green roofs, home gardens, vegetable production for home consumption, etc.). At the time of publication, the organization that has accompanied the project is linking women from CENESO with a Monterrey-based organization³ dedicated to reforestation, with the intention of continuing the process of reforestation around the CENESO and other Community Development Centres.

Financial Services

The CENESO was constructed as a mechanism for social action. It seeks to develop and strengthen women's skill base so that they can carry out actions that support the creation and implementation of effective and relevant public policy. This requires a gender perspective that incorporates the provision of financial and non-financial services. These will help women develop productive enterprises to meet their economic needs and achieve economic autonomy.

Women also spoke of some of their challenges. One challenge is that while the CENESO has progressed in its provision of non-financial services, it has yet to offer financial services. One woman commented: "The problem is the initial investment. That is why savings are needed, to launch what we all have in mind ". An important next step will be for the grassroots women to continue the dialogue with the authorities and negotiate the provision of these financial services.

Parallel Projects of BEI

BEI, in addition to their work with popular urban grassroots women's movements, also has parallel projects to increase financial and non-financial services in the area. In 2014, the organization undertook a process of training officials and government employees, including men and women who are responsible for programs related to productive projects and economic empowerment for women in poor areas. The team of officials from the State Government (Ministries of Economy, Rural Development, etc.) is presently assessing their results and accomplishments over the course of this administration, which has supported these programs. To ensure continued support for the programmes, thanks to BEI's training, the officials are preparing reports with the objective of presenting them to the incoming government for consideration. These reports demonstrate the current programmes' wealth of achievements; they also highlight areas for improvement. Additionally, through this training process, officials from

³ Capital city of the state of Nuevo Leon, in the north of Mexico.

the REDES Program for a Popular Solidarity Economy within the state government are making a comprehensive proposal to improve the CENESO initiative, seeking to replicate the model in other municipalities within the state.

Current and Future Challenges

Changes in Government

The State Government ends its mandate next year. Since CENESO is a recent initiative, a change in government could pose a risk to its sustainability. To minimize this risk, BEI is trying to shield CENESO by looking to increase the supply of financial services by mobilizing federal resources, given that the federal government has four years left to their administration. In 2014, BEI created a database of federal programs that may be useful for resourcing productive projects for women in poor areas. In the next phase of training, members of CENESO will research federal funds programs and their application processes.

Of potential benefit for us is the training process in which various state agencies, ministry officials and others have been involved. This process is also reviewing government programs that have a gender perspective, including those related to the issue of economic empowerment for women, and those that have been raising awareness about what needs to be done to enhance respect for women.

It is noteworthy that the State has developed very important laws, at both a federal and state level, for the prevention, awareness, punishment, and eradication of violence against women. They have a specific program that aims to ensure women can live a life free from violence, with the support of these laws. The Women's Institutes⁴ have a mandate for capacity building and offering safe spaces for women, including a space for treating victims of violence, as defined by law. There are also Justice Centres to which women can go to access comprehensive services. The Institutes also inform women about the protocols to follow if they are in a situation of extreme violence.

One of the main challenges that such projects face in our country is the use of social movements for political patronage in Mexico. Large numbers of leaders of popular urban and rural movements have been empowered and trained, and are exercising their leadership in social movements effectively. However, often these movements are used in political campaigns. This is a challenge facing not only grassroots women's organizations in Aquiles Serdan, Chihuahua, but also other urban and rural popular movements in the country at large. The challenge is to strengthen training processes so that they, in turn, nurture citizenship and strengthen democratic processes so as to shield grassroots organization from exploitation for political purposes.

Certainly, one of the challenges moving forward will be for the women who operate the CENESO to engage in proactive monitoring, ensuring they are following through with the commitments made by the various actors mentioned above.

⁴ These are government institutions, at the federal, state and municipal levels, responsible for equality policy and guaranteeing human rights for women. Among their top priorities is working to create a culture of equality, free from violence and discrimination that promotes the comprehensive development of all women in the country.

The institutionalization of CENESO

Another challenge, identified by many women as the *main* challenge, is securing another space for the CENESO, given that the local municipal office currently being used is a borrowed private space. There is no permanent location for CENESO; rather, they have agreed-upon days and hours of use. In a recent conversation, one of the leaders of CENESO said she is asking the mayor to grant them a new, more permanent space within one of the Community Development Centres in the municipality. That way, they would no longer have problems related to space, as one of the requirements for institutionalization is having a steady location.

With elections taking place next year in Chihuahua, CENESO women are preparing a proposal to submit to the electoral candidates calling for the institutionalization of CENESO. This would ensure that support for CENESO is not dependent on the political will of each incoming administration. It is likely that the outcome will be positive and that candidates for the coming period will want to support CENESO and its institutionalization, given the link that has been established with the outgoing mayor and the project's results to date.

Conclusion

The experience is fulfilling the purpose for which it was created. The establishment of CENESO constitutes a significant development in training grassroots women on how to implement feasible productive projects that reconcile productive and reproductive work, as well as in the construction of Safer Cities. Additionally, this project offered important prospects for promoting sustainable local development, providing training and services, garnering the enthusiastic response of local authorities, with the active participation of federal, state and municipal governments, and encouraging participation and social cohesion. All of these efforts have been realized through a mechanism that seeks to generate wealth, as well as the economic, political, social and cultural empowerment of women.

The main lessons from this experience consist of the following:

- There is a great potential for this type of project, and with close technical assistance, it will be easily scaled up.
- When a community comes together to work for a common cause, it generates synergy, social cohesion, and enthusiasm.
- Establishing local-to-local dialogues with local authorities is crucial for establishing steady support for such a project.
- A center can improve its effectiveness when there is a partnership among civil society and government actors, resulting in a virtuous cycle.

As previously mentioned, this experience sought to improve the capacity of grassroots women's groups from Aquiles Serdán to lead actions for sustainable development and to participate in the construction of Safer Cities. The CENESO was designed to influence a transformative process and generate cultural and social changes that promote women's financial autonomy. In this way, the CENESO contributes to promoting attitudes and behaviors in women that promote violence prevention. It is expected that the CENESO will generate favourable conditions for shifting gender roles. Hegemonic masculinity is challenged when women also become breadwinners.

This shift promotes relationships that are free of sexism, with men and women on a more equal footing.

Our hope is that the systematization and recording of this experience might serve the successful replication of this project in other parts of the country and the world.

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