

Everyday political practices, democracy and the environment in a native village in Mexico City

Turid Hagene*

Oslo University College, Department of Education and International Studies, Development Studies, Pilestredet 40, 0130 Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Environment
Deforestation
Democracy
Force fields
Irregular settlements
Everyday practices

In recent years there has been a debate about the extent to which democratization implies protection of the environment. This article offers an exemplary case of this debate, exploring the theoretical links between democracy and environmental protection advanced by Walker (1999): accountability, development and participation. The site of the study is a Mexican native village, one of many incorporated into the metropolis, Mexico City. The city is faced with the challenge to supply an expanding population of some 20 million with housing, clean water and oxygen. The forest in the common property belonging to the original inhabitants is formally protected with logging bans and a rigorous Land Use Plan, yet illegal sales of this communal land to new settlers result in irregular settlements which now contain one quarter of the village's inhabitants. In 1997 local elections were reinstated in Mexico City, after a suspension of nearly 70 years. Although the governing party in the city promoted the protective Land Use Plan, the party's local politicians promised to regularize the zone in exchange for votes from the irregular settlers. These dynamics are explored in the context of everyday political practices in the village. The struggles over material and symbolic resources are analyzed in terms of force fields with multiple actors, making visible the ways in which democratic elections alone cannot prevent the ongoing deforestation caused by irregular settlements.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The central issue of this article is to test the premise that liberal democracy will yield positive environmental outcomes. In recent years there has been a debate about the possible congruence between democratic governance and protection of the environment, summarized and referenced, for instance, by Sundberg (2003).

I here offer an exemplary case of this debate, focusing on the deforestation caused by irregular settlements in the periphery of Mexico's Federal District. I explore the case of a *pueblo originario* (native village) called San Lorenzo Acopilco, in the Delegation of Cuajimalpa. The village owns communal land, mostly forest; it is illegal to sell this land, which also is regulated as a zone of Ecological Preservation. Yet land is sold, and houses are built without sanctions by government or communal authorities or members of the community. Constitutional elections are held at the local level, but the elected authority does not take steps to stop deforestation. The forest supplies environmental services that are threatened: sequestering of carbon, retention of rainwater, retention of suspended particles that diminish atmospheric pollution, preservation of biodiversity and recreational

activities (Aguilar, 2008: 136). In this article I try to explain why neither formal protection of the forest, communal ownership nor democratic elections actually protect this resource; I examine how everyday political practices articulate with laws and electoral processes to bring about this failure. Liberal democracy always operates within particular economic and socio-cultural contexts; in this study I explore its involvement in the context of a native village.

Methods and materials

This article is based on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructive and situated, emerging from a "complex process involving social, situational, cultural and institutional factors" (Arce & Long, 1992: 211). I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in San Lorenzo Acopilco during a total of eleven months in the years 2001, 2003, 2005–2007. The methods comprise semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, lifestories and the study of documents from several archives: Agrarian Archives, the Parochial Archive, the Archive of Communal Good, and some private archives in the village. The backbone of my ethnographic fieldwork, however, is participant observation, which entails "the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies" (Bryman, 2004: 291) (Figs. 1–3).

* Tel.: +47 22452154; fax: +47 22452105.

E-mail address: turid.hagene@lui.hio.no

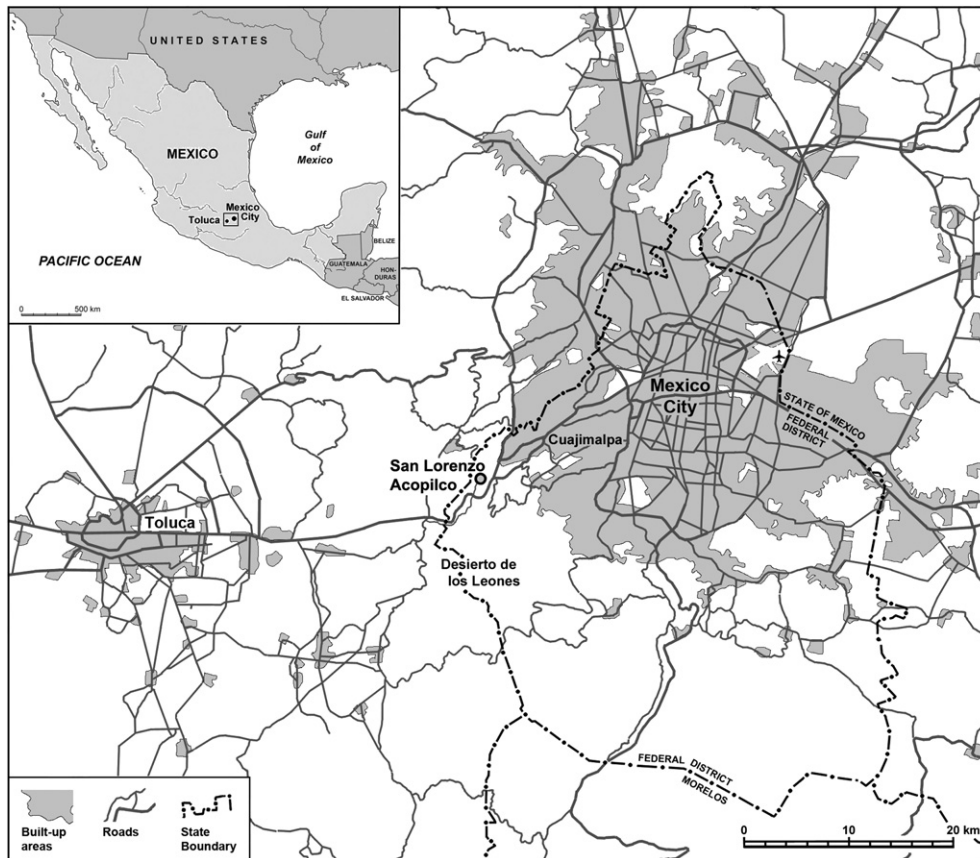


Fig. 1. Location of San Lorenzo Acopilco, Delegation Cuajimalpa, Mexico City. Elaborated by Jon Tolgensbakk, University of Oslo.

I participated in the preparation and realization of numerous ritual activities, religious as well as family-based, throughout the year, which gave me insight into ways in which various networks were formed. I lived in the village and gained personal experience of issues like water shortage and traffic congestion, adding to the phenomenological knowledge that I shared with the villagers. Living there also provided me with access to some of the village rumor and gossip. The “firsthand involvement in the relevant activities” (Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, & Turner, 1995: 38) of the villagers also gave me access to implicit knowledge that the villagers took for granted and I would not have thought of asking about. My participation in everyday and ceremonial activities made me a well-known figure, and people got used to talking to me. Most of my sources are oral; in order to protect the identity of my informants I have in many cases altered their names or avoided using names altogether.

Democracy and the environment: the debate

According to Lafferty and Meadowcroft (1996: 2) there is a strong tendency to assume something of a “natural” congruence between democratic decision procedures and sound substantive environmental policy outcomes.

The authors particularly refer to the documentation issued by international organizations, for instance UNDP and UNESCO.

As several researchers have pointed out, however, it is debatable to what extent democracy, however it is defined, necessarily contributes toward the protection of the environment (see for instance Larson, 2006; Sundberg, 2003; Walker, 1999). First of all, it is questionable whether there is any theoretical link between

democracy and the environment. For instance, Sundberg (2003: 716) cites some theoretical and philosophical sources which refute such linkages (Dobson, 1996; Goodin, 1992: 118; Saward, 1993). The main contention of these authors is that democracy concerns procedure, while environmentalism is about outcomes;



Fig. 2. San Lorenzo Acopilco between Federal Road to Toluca and border to State of Mexico. Air-photo from Google, adapted by Jon Tolgensbakk.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1062265>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1062265>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)