

CDRO: Cooperation for Rural Development in Western Guatemala



Francisco Sic and Jaime Walter Garcia string an exact number of resist-dyed threads for a loom warp to create a desired textile pattern. CDRO's most profitable project, the Programa Artesanal annually ships textiles worth \$100,000 from Totonicapán to markets throughout the world. Photo by Nestor Vega

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Mayan Indians in Guatemala live in a country rich in cultural traditions and natural resources. But for over 400 years, wealth and power have been held by the descendants of the Spanish conquerors and their business partners. For Mayan citizens, who constitute 60 percent of the population, development can be understood as “the development of others at the expense of our lives and our resources,” according to Virgilio Alvarado, a leader in the Asociación Cooperación para el Desarrollo Rural de Occidente (CDRO), a nongovernmental development organization. For Alvarado, “The present conditions of the Mayan people result from a process of colonization in which the ancient Mayan Quiché system of organization lost control over its forms of subsistence, its management of resources, and its power to influence change.” Alvarado adds that part of the solution to discrimination, poverty, and dependency can be found “within the rural communities themselves.”

For 12 years, the 20 Mayan Quiché communities of the region of Totonicapán associated with CDRO have successfully mobilized for economic and cultural self-determination. To accomplish this, they have strengthened, recovered, and reinvented a form of traditional social organization called the *consejo comunal*, which was developed over 200 years ago in Latin America to replace hereditary leadership. Alvarado explains that this organization is not new, but represents wisdom gained in centuries of experience. The *Popol Vuh* or “Council Book,” the ancient sacred book of the Mayas, was consulted by the Quiché when they sat in council before the Spanish conquest. Today the 20 community councils CDRO has organized according to indigenous Mayan principles have become agents of local development.

The Mayan organizational concept *pop*, which can mean literally “a woven mat,” describes CDRO’s structure of interrelated and complementary roles, committees, councils, programs, and authority. Alvarado explains it with the story in the *Popol Vuh* in which Grandmother Ixmucané got a message to her grandsons, the twins Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué, by giving it to the louse, who was assisted by the toad, who was assisted by the snake, who was assisted by the hawk. The cooperative interaction between all these creatures was needed for success.

CDRO’s success demonstrates a viable grassroots alternative to outside-directed programs for sustainable development. By preserving and building an organizational infrastructure that is guided by local cultural values and capable of taking advantage of available technology, CDRO has established effective projects in education and training for management, in textile production and marketing, and in nutrition and health services. It also runs agricultural credit programs.

Where will this lead them? The Mayan Quiché, the people of the ancient *Popol Vuh*, have developed an independent yet interdependent point of view. “Our future is not necessarily other peoples’ present,” Alvarado tells us.

— Olivia Cadaval