

Indigenous Women and Learning Experiences about Creative Economies Related with the Sustainable Development in Angahuan Mexico

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Abstract: This paper presents some of the experiences, as lessons learned, of research on sustainable development in the indigenous Purepecha village of Angahuan. This work has occurred during the last five years, which involved working with a group of young women focused on the development of the creative economy in the village. As matter of fact, sustainable development is a priority in Mexican indigenous community agendas, and several examples have been practiced in a creative way in order to go forward to achieve their own goals. The creative economy in the Angahuan town is mainly gastronomy and crafts and folk arts, which are mostly done by the women of the village. The gastronomy practiced in the area has been recognized as intangible world heritage by UNESCO, and the crafts represent most of the income for village families. This explains the main achievements of working on the creative economy issues among indigenous young people through the community of learning and practice method. We also want to highlight the advantages of the communitarian media as an incentive for learning among peers. In order to make the community of practice attractive for the village youth, the project was supported by the communitarian radio station of the village, and in this way, the participants could incorporate the radio station as a teaching-learning tool among peers.

Key words: creative economies; communitarian media; indigenous community; women empowerment

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1. Introduction

The Purepecha pre-hispanic ethnicity is one of the biggest indigenous group in Mexico, and it is the biggest in the state of Michoacán. It is represented by more than 105 000 (INEGI, 2009, p. 111) people and it is organized in four Purepecha zones; *ciénega*, *lacustre*, *cañada*, and *meseta*. The Purepecha people are well known for conserving their traditions for the world to better understand them, for their own governance, and for their celebrations. They also represent a proud part of the living history of Mexico, and in this way, they are a current link between the pre-hispanic era of Indo-American towns and the 21st century.

The Angahuan Purepecha village is located in the “meseta” zone within the forest next to the Parikutin volcano. The primary economic activity is wood working as well as tourism services. However, the Angahuan village is considered one of the poorest in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. The official language in the village is the Purepecha language, and the average of the education level of the citizens is basic school. Some of the current

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problems in the village are migratory conditions, addictions among the young population, and gender inequality.

Despite of the migration situation, which makes most of the men in the village migrate to United States of America in order to find job opportunities, women in the village get in charge of the economy of the families. The Purepecha women develop gastronomic, art and textile manufacturing as main economic activities, most of these activities are related with the tourism services offered in region.

Through different previous works related with the Angahuan Village we could observe the important role of women in the families, such as the research of Tinajero about sustainable activities in the village (2012), in which, women of the community are described as nuclear in the indigenous society. On the same way, we can find researches focused in the social interactions among youths of the town, like the Guevara's paper (2015), who shows the everyday dynamic among youths, in which, women usually show better conditions for get organized.

During the last ten years some NGO's and academics have developed different programs in order to generate new opportunities of learning and of economic alternatives; most of the programs were supported under the rubric of sustainable development. One of the more rewarding programs was the development of the communitarian radio in the village; Radio Sapicho. Since 2007 the communitarian radio station has been managed by the village youth, and the contents are completely produced in the Purepecha language, their own native language.

In 2010 a *community of learning and practice* was established by 12 young indigenous women, and the group began with the purpose of encouraging peer learning about creative economies in the town. The gastronomy, crafts, and folk arts were the main topics for these collaborative discussions, and Radio Sapicho was the ICT learning platform for sharing goals achieved by the work in group.

2. Literature Review

A number of scholars have reported the conditions of the indigenous economies on the world, mostly focused on the environmental and folkloric items, such the same has happened with the conditions of the Purepecha ethnicity in. Most of the studies reviewed point to the environmental and demographic problems in towns, but mostly of them are presented as separated research branches. Despite of interdisciplinary studies are the few, we can highlight some research reports that allow us to figurate different social conditions in the Purepecha communities, conditions that are part of the everyday dynamic that can give us specific details of central issues.

As it is known, traditional land is a vital source for the everyday activities in the indigenous communities, according with the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research, problems with traditional land in indigenous communities became a main research topic in recent days because they are related to the globalism dynamic. In most of the cases, as in Latin America happens, indigenous communities are highly dependent to the sources of the land, such as food, wood, water and even green energy (Bartlett et al., 2007).

In Purepecha towns of Mexico, the main problem related with the environment is the forest exploitation. Wood is the principal element for housebuilding and for the art crafts economies in the area, but it becomes a problem because wood it is also constantly wanted by transnational papermaker companies and drug cartels. As it can be imagined, the fight for forest exploitation and forest preservation has developed collateral difficulties, such as violence and family disintegration, among others (Tinajero et al., 2010).

In the Angahuan village, several men are able to work in wood furniture building, never the less, the alcohol addiction is high in this sector. The alcoholic problem among old men in the village influences other domestic problems, such as poor management of the family income, health deterioration and domestic violence. With this

situation, women have to take care of the family and get small incomes through the art crafts or eventual gastronomy occasions. This behavior is one of the common examples where women of the community get in charge of the families and show eventual empowerment.

On the understanding that youths in the community report that they do not have enough opportunities to grow up as productive adults, they demand better job options or better conditions to develop their own business, they also believe that the government is not taking care of them. So with this panorama, a lot of youth men of the community decide to migrate illegally to United States of America (USA) in order to find eventual jobs in farms and fields. As a matter of fact, almost every family in the village has one or more members of the family working as illegal immigrant in USA.

As we can see, for the purpose of this research report, we considered different points of view about the sociodemographic situation of the Purepecha towns, this, with the intention of relate the different historical problems of the own community. In this way, we can find the migration, the health situation and the criminal activities as an important factor which impacts in the family economies.

Guevara (2015, p. 193) describes how a small indigenous town as Angahuan has criminal activities through gangs conformed by males of the community, most of them are men coming back from USA as illegal workers, who, during their stances at the neighbor country started to take in drugs as usual habit. Once these workers have come back to the community they spend part of their incomes to getting their drugs, added to this situation, once they are in the town they usually avoid to get involved in a job because they prefer to spend the time with their peers in the gang.

The gang activity in the community represents a health and a criminal problem, by the time the gang men are consider as addicts, they have been found developing robberies and assaults to citizens in the town and even to their own relatives in the family. As we can understand, this is not an isolated social behavior, it does influence in main aspects of the life in the village, one of the most evident aspects affected by gang activities is the local economy.

Related with the economy and its several problems in Purepecha towns, we can find a few examples in which well-organized people (mostly indigenous women) had developed small creative industries where they have found a way to grow up in entrepreneurship. Several scholars has shown that indigenous creative industries are one of the last recognized but most innovate sectors in the world (Barrowclough & Wriqth, 2008). In Angahuan village, women have developed big examples, as the one related with the gastronomy which earns the intangible heritage title by the UNESCO in 2009.

As an important part of the everyday life in the Purepecha community, traditions are taught from generation to generation, art craft building, traditional dances, music, farming, field working and religious celebrations, among others. Never the less, cuisine is probably the most well-known tradition in the Angahuan village, more after the formal international recognition, “the traditional indigenous cuisine and the Pirekua song, which were inscribed on the representative list of the Intangible World Heritage by UNESCO” (Farías, 2015).

It was precisely focusing on traditions and on creative industries that this case of study was developed, as it will be explain, a group of young women was conformed in order to work in a community of learning and practice incentivizing teaching learning activities among peers. In this small community, the practice of education was the purpose, but the women empowerment, learning about creative economies and developing the entrepreneurship thinking were de goals.

3. Case Study

The community of practice is one of the oldest way by which human beings learn through experience, and the main purpose is to share the knowledge among the participants through everyday practice. According to Etienne Wenger, “Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems...” (Wenger, 2011). In this way, a community of practice can be considered as an efficient interactive strategy for the learning achievements in a group.

On the year 2008 a small group of researchers coming from a university in Morelia (Capital city of the State of Michoacan) started working with the indigenous community of Angahuan, the work beginning works were focused on the family economy management, addiction prevention and ecological education for the youths. The job was organized by the prince in the church, who was allowed by the community for managing the projects and for the translation because only a few of the locals were able to speak Spanish.

Once the first projects were going on, the people in the community asked for more academic orientation in several issues, one of the most important was related with the purpose of developing an own radio station, by which, local advertising and entertainment could be offered in the own Purepecha language. In the year 2009 academics of the communication sciences field were incorporated to the workings with the community, and the broadcasting capacitation program was developed reaching the recognition of the Radio Sapicho¹, the radio station of Angahuan village totally spoken in their own indigenous native language.

As it happens in several projects related with media, teenagers were clearly excited to participate in the radio shows of Radio Sapicho, by the beginning there were more than 20 participants in the capacitation program, but once the sessions were growing and demanding more time, the group was reduced to only 12 participants, all of them young women. The condition of having only women participating with the group was surprising by the beginning, but later it was totally understandable if we realize that women in the community historically shows higher levels of compromise in group activities.

Even that the participation of the young women in the group was really compromised, several problems were faced; and probably two of the biggest problems faced were the language and the gender equality. As we have told, in Purepecha community the native language is the “Purepecha”, but never the less, women aren’t allowed to speak with unknown men, less if the men are foreign people of the community. After several introductory sessions, and with the big help of the priest in the church, parents allowed young women to participate in the capacitation program just under supervision of the priest.

The first generation of the capacitation program of Radio Sapicho was such a success. Since 2004 several intents of broadcasting were tried in the village, but until 2009 the radio station was working as a real community radio broadcaster, under the requirements of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). Everyday local business were advertising their products, entertainment and community information was shared in purepecha language by the radio shows. Radio Sapicho became well-known not just in the village; it was also well recognized in the Purepecha area.

Since the beginning the radio broadcasting had as advantage the young women’s knowledge about different issues, such as traditional cuisine, agriculture and folk arts. With these records, in the year 2010 the small group of

¹ Radio Sapicho means “Small Radio” in Purpecha language.

women broadcasters realized the necessity of the self and continuous capacitation of the group, they did understand the importance of the independence, they knew that they couldn't have the experts for the capacitation the rest of the days. Under this kind of concerns a community of learning and practice was conformed, but this time not only with the purpose of learning about broadcasting, this time there were bigger goals among the young women; the women empowerment, the creative economies development and the entrepreneurship thinking.

One of the first purpose was to share the knowledge with all participants in the group, in order to begin with a teaching-learning practice among peers. The experience of sharing knowledge allowed the young participants to recognize an enjoyable way of no formal education. Several academics were invited to give speeches about different issues; business managing, law criteria for business development, gender equality, domestic violence and prevention of addictions, among others. This time the radio broadcasting was an important tool, because most of the diffusion among other women in the village was by this media and in their own language.

Since the first steps conforming the community of practice and learning, the activity was recorder trough different qualitative techniques, such as deep interviews, focus groups and endogenous observations. All of these techniques were part of a whole ethnography research, in which, the main objective was to analyze how indigenous youths can be educated by their peers by practice about common interests. Even that the purpose of the community of practice was learn among peers, the purpose of the ethnography was to analyze the no formal education process among youth people through a community of practice and learning.

During the ethnography process the help of co-researchers was a very important factor, these co-researchers were part of the community under analysis, and they could give us different points of view about the topics under discussion. With the translation as a main activity, the indigenous youth co-researchers also helped us with the understanding of different aspects from their own perspective of the world, such as the climate, the time, the village dynamic, the festivities and several rites.

Once the recorded materials were systematized, the research could realize that there was a big difference in the appropriation of the topics that were taught by the experts with the speeches, than the topics that they were teaching each other, of course it had to do with language, but it was related also with the self-confidence and the leadership among the youths. By this time of the research the speech analysis was added as an important complementary tool for the ethnography.

As it can be imagined, another important tool of the ethnography was the biography of the young women of the group, the focus on self-stories was determinant for the relation about the participants and some specific topics; the most sensitive topics referred by the participants were gender equality, women empowerment and entrepreneurship. This information becomes relevant if we remember that women in indigenous Mexican towns are usually violated in their rights as independence, education and expression freedom, among others.

After five years of working with the Radio Sapicho Community of Practice, we could observe different moments where the participants showed satisfactory results, some of them also had to do with the objectives of the sustainable development and the creative economies in the village.

4. Conclusion

During the recording and the analysis of the activity in the Radio Sapicho Community of practice, several data about young indigenous women were collected according with the research purpose, some of them can be highlighted, such as: 100% of the participants referred to had been victim of discrimination by gender inequality

at home, 75% of the participants had ended just six years of basic school as formal education, 65% of the youth women referred had experimented domestic violence, and 100% of the participants wanted to begin with a small business through which could help the economy of their families.

One of the most important achievements during the research work was the recognition of the women as a transcendental element in the indigenous village creative economies, they could realize that they were able to manage a whole family business, business that was also contributing to generate small jobs in the village, by the same time that they were teaching to their daughters how to face the local economic issues in the global era.

The capacity of organization among women was another acknowledge, they referred that some other occasions they found a big problem to entrepreneur with other women, principally the problem was to orientate the different efforts, but once the radio station was inviting experts in the topic, women had more confidence and they encouraged themselves for facing all the organization, paper work, managing work and learning process demanded for running a business.

During the process of working among the community of peers, one of the most important aspects under observation was the teaching learning process; in this way we could found that it was a main speech topic on the peer's conversations. Learning was an exciting element of the practice, women found very interesting to appropriate new words to their own language, and it is because through the language humans understand in different ways the same world. The favorite words for the women in the community of practice were: "emprendedor"², "empoderamiento"³ and "equidad"⁴, all of them related with women needs in this kind of indigenous villages.

As it was told, the formal educational level of the participants was lower than basic, so by the time they started to learn once again they understood that education can be a process for the whole life, and it is a process which can happens even out of the school in different ways. It was the financial education one of the fields in which indigenous women found an important tool for women empowerment, bringing independence and self-confidence for taking decisions for them and their families.

Language was the main element for establish the dialogs among peers in the community, and we can remark that language was the key on the community success, not only because it allowed the communication among the participants; it also incentivized the participants to build their own concepts in their own language. As it was told, several concepts in the Spanish language were introduced to the participants, but some other concepts were developed by the participants, so they tried to build these concepts as a part of their common life, it was the case of the word "heritage" as an example, which doesn't have a translation in Purepecha language, but the young women did a translation to the word "Ireta" which means land, our land, something which owns us.

Entrepreneurship was another concept which was receipted, learned and rebuilt by the women in the community of practice, even that de concept was worked in Spanish language as "emprededurismo" and it was not translated to the Purepecha language, the meaning and understanding of the whole idea was transformative among the participants. We could realize that this kind of central ideas in the community development issues are crucial for understanding the new world, entrepreneurship can be taught in a very efficient level in classrooms and books, but there are still several social sectors (a lot of them in Latin-American indigenous towns) who are out of the scholar systems, and they are also an important element for de sustainable development in our countries.

² Entrepreneur.

³ Empowerment.

⁴ Equality.

Entrepreneur thinking is not an easy concept in indigenous communities, it is not even easy in big cities of the developing countries, entrepreneurship demands learning, understanding but more over practice. To practice the entrepreneurship is the only way to learn about the fails and the achievements in business developing, but practicing entrepreneurship in team gives the opportunity to face the problems together sharing the risks and the responsibilities, which also promotes the confidence to continue facing new fails and achievements.

As we could observe in Radio Sapicho Community of Learning and Practice, education among peers becomes a profitable way to incentive the economy development in not formal educated groups, such as some indigenous towns, especially in groups who were separated of school system, as the case of the indigenous women in Purepecha villages of Mexico. The educational works among women showed to the research the concerns that the own indigenous women have about the environment, the community development and the empowerment opportunities for their daughters, sisters, aunts and young girls in the community.

The learning-teaching process among peers gave results not only in the topics discussed related with economy development and entrepreneurship, after a few years, it also gave to the participants a chance for develop identity, cohesion, image and self-recognizing of the capacities of the indigenous women. Several inquiries about women in indigenous communities have been described by scholars, and in this occasion, we had the opportunity get evidence of the reconfiguration of the role of women in the Angahuan village by the women themselves, using the education among peers as a method and with the economic development as an incentive.

By the time this research did the last review of the economic data of the Angahuan indigenous village, we could find that some economical rates had grown up, especially in activities related with tourism; art crafts transactions were extended even in some other touristic points out of the village, gastronomy offer was formalized with the purpose of generate options for visitors and for young employee, a few tours for the visitors were structured in Spanish language and also in English. As it can be imagined, all these growing indicators were not result of the community of practice worked as a case of study, it was a result of several efforts developed by the same time in the village, but the Radio Sapicho Community of Practice and Learning was a key element in de village development.

Nowadays the Angahuan village is still dealing with several social problems, most of them, the same problems that are being faced in most of the rural areas of the Mexican geography, such as violence, gender inequality, economic recession in small towns and addictions among youths. Unemployment it is a problem in which rates have been going down, despite of, it has been only going down in men, the rate of women in unemployment conditions it is still high, more in indigenous women.

The purpose of this research was to get an evidence, in which, it could be shown how the own citizens of an indigenous village can be dealing with their problems, having support in academics but just giving orientation for facing problems since a specific view. Talking about economy development, it was not the purpose of the experts to teach how to run successful business, the purpose was to instill in the indigenous women the entrepreneur thinking promoting the self-encourage for the everyday empowerment by themselves.

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