



REFLECTING ON PEACE PRACTICE PROJECT

Case Study

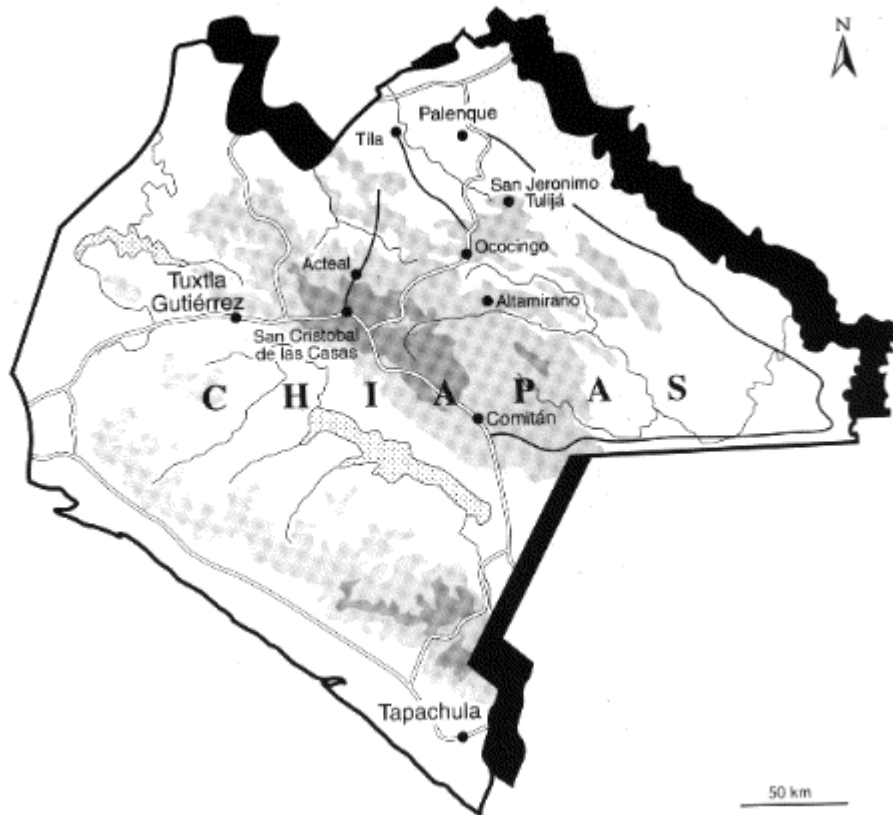
International Service for Peace (SIPAZ): Promoting Peacebuilding and Nonviolent Conflict Transformation in Chiapas, Mexico

This case study is one of 26 cases developed as part of the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP). The RPP cases were not written as evaluations; rather, they were written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across the range of cases. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people—the case writer, agencies, project participants, and observers—at the point it was written. RPP would like to acknowledge the generosity of the agencies involved in donating their time and experience for these case studies, as well as their willingness to share their experience with the worldwide community of peace practitioners.

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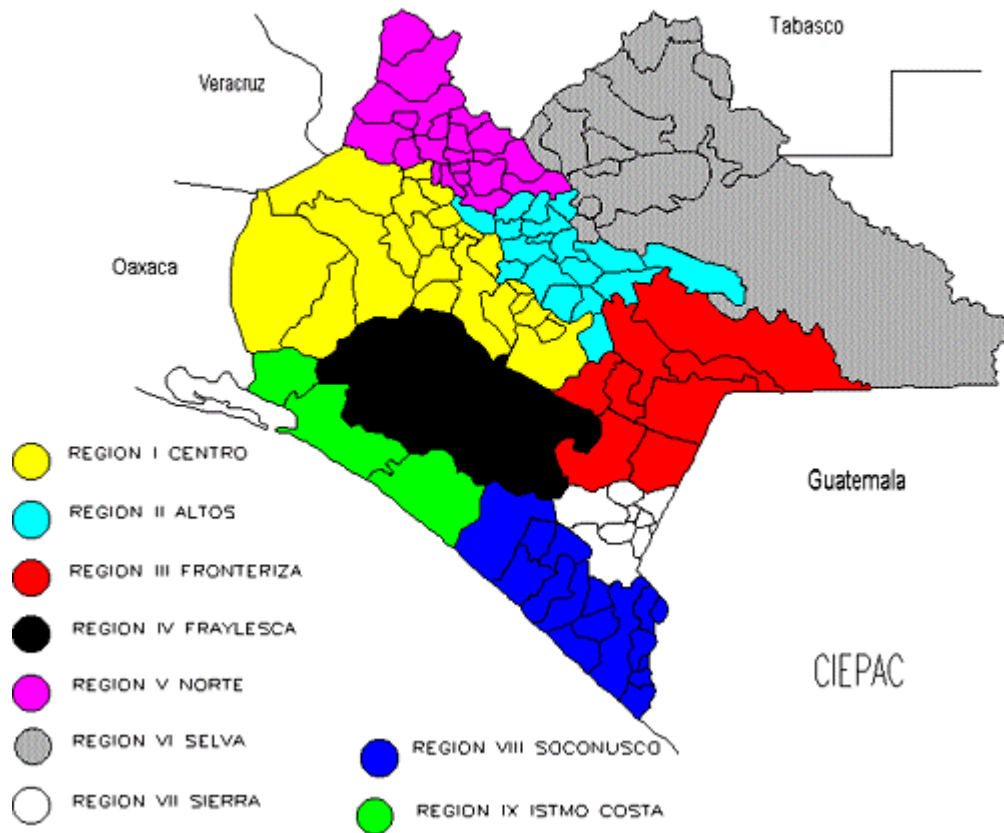
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Chiapas and its primary cities and Chiapas within Mexico, from “Maps of Chiapas and Mexico,” posted by Mark Connolly, Irish Mexico Group, <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3102/maps.html>, February 7, 1999.

REGIONES EN CHIAPAS



This map shows the different regions of Chiapas. The official conflict zone encompasses Los Altos (the Highlands) and La Selva (the Lacandón Forest). La Zona Norte (the Northern Zone) is also marked by high levels of paramilitary activity. San Cristóbal de las Casas, the town out of which many NGOs operate, is located in Los Altos near where Los Altos meet El Centro. This map is courtesy of the Chiapas-based NGO CIEPAC.

Introduction

On January 1, 1994, a conflict that had long been brewing in Mexico's southern state of Chiapas finally erupted. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, Spanish acronym), claiming to represent Chiapas's indigenous population, used the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a signal that it was time to rise up and demand such necessities as land, access to credit and markets, adequate housing, food, healthcare and education, justice and democracy from the Mexican government.

While the armed portion of the conflict ended after twelve days, the conflict itself has continued ever since. The number of soldiers who belong to the EZLN, while unknown, is thought to be small (with headquarters in the Lacandon Forest). However, its supporters, who play an important role in determining EZLN actions, include vast numbers of indigenous communities within the state of Chiapas. Two other forces have made their presence felt. An estimated 30,000 to 70,000 Mexican army troops are stationed within the state. In addition, 12 to 16 paramilitary forces, although not recognized by the government, function within the northern region and the conflict zone. The presence of these three forces has exacerbated human rights violations and economic, social and political destabilization within indigenous communities primarily in the Highlands and the Lacandon Forest, which make up the official conflict zone, and in the Northern Zone where the most powerful paramilitary organization operates.

As soon as the conflict began in 1994 and continuing over the course of the ensuing year, Mexican human rights, independent religious organizations and representatives of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which serves the conflict area, asked for a permanent international presence in the state. Phil McManus, who has a long history of working with Witness for Peace¹ in Central America and currently chairs the task force for Latin America and the Caribbean for the Fellowship of Reconciliation,² participated in an emergency Fellowship of Reconciliation delegation to the conflict area. He and his counterparts in other peace promoting organizations in the United States, recognizing the level of commitment that such a presence would require, hesitated in responding to this call. However, as Mexican organizations continued making requests over the year, the United States-based organizations saw that there was a real sense of crisis in Chiapas that demanded as much international support as possible.

Five U.S.-based organizations decided to create an organization that would come out of a coalition of faith-based and nonviolence based organizations in the United States, Europe and Latin America that shared a common concern regarding the situation in Chiapas. The idea was to provide Mexican organizations in Chiapas with as broad a support base as possible and to ensure that the responsibility for such a presence was broadly carried. These five founding organizations, Global Exchange, Peaceworkers, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Pax Christi, Resource Center for Nonviolence, Servicio Paz y Justicia en América Latina and Casa de los Amigos³, sent a

¹ Witness for Peace was founded in the early 1980s as a "politically independent, grassroots organization...committed to nonviolence and led by faith and conscience...[with the] mission [of] support[ing] peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing US policies and corporate practices which contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean." (See Witness for Peace Mission Statement, adopted November 1998).

²The Fellowship of Reconciliation was founded in 1915 in response to World War I as a Christian pacifist witness organization. Now it focuses on justice issues and has 40 national chapters throughout world.

³ According to Phil McManus, while "all of these groups were represented on the original February 1995 delegation during which the decision to found SIPAZ was made,...by June 1995, Casa de los Amigos, a

delegation to Chiapas in February 1995 to determine the most likely form for such an ongoing presence. They returned to Chiapas in June to establish an organizational base called the International Service for Peace (SIPAZ, Spanish acronym), and their first staff, including one Mexican who would serve as coordinator of SIPAZ/Chiapas and one volunteer team member from the United States, arrived in Chiapas in November.⁴

Over the past four years, more than 18 people from approximately 10 countries have volunteered or collaborated with SIPAZ in Chiapas for periods of time ranging from one month to over three years. It was SIPAZ's intention from the beginning to staff its Chiapas office primarily with international volunteers in order to provide the international presence and support to Mexican organizations that SIPAZ envisioned in its original Statement of Purpose. However, SIPAZ also relies on the assistance of nationals to carry out its projects. For example, one Mexican works with SIPAZ part-time in the area of inter-religious work. (See section on SIPAZ's organizational structure for more information about staffing.)

The SIPAZ team imagined that its first two staff people in Chiapas would set up an office, establish strong relationships with other organizations working to promote peace in Chiapas, and maintain communication with a wide variety of individuals involved in the situation in Chiapas. This would be an exploratory phase, and SIPAZ would carry out periodic evaluations to determine the effectiveness of its activities and the appropriateness of the tasks it was taking on.⁵ SIPAZ's activities and their underlying motivations included the following:

1. Opening and maintaining channels of communication with the full spectrum of social actors in the conflict. SIPAZ believes that relationships based on mutual respect can reduce excesses and can foster a climate in which a negotiated solution appears both more necessary and more feasible.
2. Observation and reporting. SIPAZ seeks to be an objective and credible source of information on the conflict and the peace process that will be relied upon by non-governmental and official sources both in Mexico and abroad.
3. Observation as a deterrent to human rights abuses. The mere presence of international observers in a conflict situation has been demonstrated to have a restraining influence on those who take recourse to violence. SIPAZ seeks to have a visible, recognizable presence with the mobility and flexibility necessary to respond to both crises and ongoing conflicts.
4. Accompaniment and support of those who are working to support the peace process and a negotiated solution to the crisis, especially those who are the subject of threatened violence.⁶

Quaker house of hospitality and service center in Mexico City, had decided not to become a member group of SIPAZ out of concern that it might not be an appropriate role for them as a Mexican Civil Association.”

⁴ The Mexican coordinator has continued in his position through the present day, while the original volunteer remained with SIPAZ for one year. In February 1996, two new volunteers from Peru and Uruguay joined them. The first stayed with SIPAZ for two years. The second remained for one, although she continues to play an active role with SIPAZ and recently became SIPAZ's International Outreach Coordinator.

⁵ See SIPAZ Objectives, August 1995.

⁶ This list represents SIPAZ's original conception of its lines of work as the first team went to Chiapas.

While SIPAZ's goals have remained the same over the past five years, SIPAZ has modified and expanded the tasks undertaken in response to the changing nature of the conflict in which it operates.

This case study describes SIPAZ's evolution within the Chiapas conflict setting. It discusses SIPAZ's successes, as well as the obstacles it has faced. It places SIPAZ within the context of a complex world of non-governmental and religious organizations working to promote peace in Chiapas. Finally, it outlines a series of issues with which SIPAZ has had to wrestle as it seeks to maximize its contribution to peacemaking in Chiapas.

Background of the country and the conflict

Chiapas, Mexico's southern-most state, is also one of Mexico's richest in natural resources and poorest in terms of quality of life for its population. As of 1995, a little over three million people lived in Chiapas, with approximately 700,000 of these people representing eight different indigenous groups that are, with the exception of one group, descendants of the Maya. These figures also place Chiapas among the four Mexican states with the highest concentrations of indigenous populations.

Economically, Chiapas is Mexico's second highest agriculture producing state. It is the country's largest coffee producer, third in terms of maize, fourth in terms of cattle, and places among the top three producers of tobacco, bananas, soy and cacao.⁷ In addition, Chiapas is an oil-rich state with many of its reserves as yet untapped. Chiapas's rivers currently provide Mexico with 13 percent of its electricity and 52 percent of its hydroelectric power.⁸ Finally, Chiapas's forests, filled with cedar and mahogany, have served as the basis of a lucrative extractive industry.

In spite of this natural wealth, the majority of Chiapas's population lives in poverty. Sixty percent of the population, or two times the national average, live in rural settings. In what was to become the conflict zone, approximately 75 percent of the population lacked access to electricity while approximately 70 percent lacked potable water. Over half of the entire state's population suffered from malnutrition, less than 40 percent of the population finished first grade, and over 30 percent of the population was illiterate. These figures were often two and three times larger than national averages.⁹

To make matters worse, Chiapas was experiencing a tremendous rate of population growth due to both high birth rates and immigration. By the mid-1980s, the growth rate in parts of the state had reached seven percent per year.¹⁰ This was the result of a process begun in the 1930s. Government-directed and economically and resource-driven immigration both into Chiapas from neighboring states and within Chiapas took their toll on the state's ecosystem and social services.

⁷ Roger Burbach and Peter Rosset, "Policy Brief No. 1: Chiapas and the Crisis of Mexican Agriculture," (Oakland, CA: Institute for Food and Development Policy, December 1994), p. 2.

⁸ "Geographical Profile," in Chiapas, Present & Future, a state in Southern Mexico, [<http://www.chiapasinfo.com/chap1-3.html>], August 7, 1998.

⁹ Naomi Adelson, "The Environmental Roots of the Chiapas Uprising," in Journal of Public and International Affairs, Vol. 8, Spring 1997, pp. 123-124; and Stephen J. Wager and Donald E. Schulz, The Awakening: The Zapatista Revolt and its Implications for Civil-Military Relations and the Future of Mexico (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, December 1994), p. 2.

¹⁰ Carlos Tello Díaz, "The Conflict in Chiapas," speech delivered in a Hearing of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere Committee on International Relations, The U.S. House of Representatives, July 29, 1998.

Many of these immigrants ended up in the ecologically fragile and socially under-served Lacandon Forest in which the EZLN eventually formed its stronghold. In addition, approximately 100,000 Guatemalans seeking refuge from their own war found their way into Chiapas, further stressing land, social services and limited economic opportunities in the state.

Starting in the 1970s, Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruíz, leader of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, began to help Chiapas's poor, indigenous populations recognize the circumstances in which they were living and organize in order to demand economic and social improvements from the government. Many of Chiapas's indigenous peasants organized into what were to become relatively powerful farmers' organizations. Later, representatives of the national Maoist student movement came into the state to help these groups organize politically.

Over the next two to three decades, these primarily farmer organizations asked the local, state and federal government for greater access to land, credit, agricultural inputs, markets and social services. While some of these were granted, their distribution often depended on political motives, and many within Chiapas remained without the assistance they required.

Between 1988 and 1994, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, eager to prepare Mexico to enter into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and the United States, privatized many state-owned enterprises, reduced agricultural subsidies drastically, liberalized trade policies and encouraged foreign investment. All of these acts, taking place simultaneously with the country's second debt crisis in a little over a decade and plummeting coffee prices, had a devastating impact on small- and medium-scale producers in Chiapas.

In 1992, President Salinas passed the Land Law of 1992, which altered the Mexican Constitution in order to promote private investment in the oil and timber industries and in cattle ranching and agriculture by granting large-scale producers and foreign investors private ownership of land. This law ended the government's land redistribution program and made all land, including previously communally owned land, available for sale and purchase. Unfortunately, approximately one-third of all outstanding petitions for land were concentrated in Chiapas.¹¹ In addition, while major shifts in land ownership did not take place in Chiapas, the fears the new law raised among Chiapas's indigenous population regarding the potential loss of land were sufficient to further destabilize an already tenuous situation in Chiapas.

Many in Chiapas viewed the signing of NAFTA as final proof that the Mexican government was going to sacrifice the well-being of its subsistence farmers and small-scale producers in order to become a full participant in the emerging global economy. Thus, the day of NAFTA's signing became a trigger for rebellion in the state. On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), representing a portion of Chiapas's indigenous population, resorted to armed conflict. After years of organizing and presenting their demands to government officials, those who formed the EZLN believed that the changes they desired, including land reform and recognition of indigenous communities' traditional governing structures, would not come about through peaceful negotiations. Capping five years of downturns in global commodity prices (e.g., coffee) and shifts in Mexican law in favor of large-scale private enterprise, the signing of NAFTA became the starting point for a low-intensity war in Chiapas between primarily indigenous farmers and the Mexican government.

¹¹ Neil Harvey, "The Reshaping of Agrarian Policy in Mexico," in Changing Structure of Mexico: Political, Social and Economic Prospects, ed. Laura Randall (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996), pp. 107–108.

A ceasefire, begun less than two weeks after the beginning of the uprising, has largely held, although a heavy military and paramilitary presence in the state has continued to make life difficult for Chiapas's population. Yet, government and EZLN representatives began negotiating a peaceful end to the conflict quickly after the official violent phase of the conflict was over. When this proved more difficult than the government anticipated, both sides accepted Bishop Samuel Ruíz as mediator and set up the National Commission of Mediation (CONAI, Spanish acronym) to support his work. By September 1995, the two sides had defined four areas of discussion for the negotiations, and by February 1996, they had reached an agreement within the first area, which was dedicated to indigenous rights and culture.

Unfortunately, in September the EZLN, frustrated by the government's hesitancy in enacting the first accord into law, walked away from the negotiating table. The EZLN claimed that the government was not negotiating in good faith and refused to return to the negotiations until the government had made the first accord law, disarmed the growing paramilitary presence in Chiapas, and showed a willingness to negotiate and implement an agreement on the second area of discussion, national issues of democracy and justice. In December, the government's negotiating body did put forth a proposal in the Mexican Congress that would incorporate the accord on indigenous rights and culture into a constitutional reform, but while the EZLN approved the proposal, the government rejected it citing concerns regarding autonomy and sovereignty. Eighteen months later in June 1998, Bishop Samuel Ruíz and the CONAI, responding to constant negative pressure from the government, left their role as the mediating body to the conflict. To date the negotiations have not resumed.

Meanwhile, the conflict has become much more complex. Since the beginning of 1994, EZLN supporters have formed 32 autonomous municipalities and eight autonomous regions within the conflict zone (the Highlands and the Lacandón Forest) and within the Northern Zone. Many of their leaders are successfully providing their populations with a responsive government and services that they never before had. They believe themselves justified in creating these autonomous governing units based on the Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture that the EZLN and the Mexican government signed but did not turn into law. They also ground themselves in the Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization signed by the Mexican government, which recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to live according to their own practices and customs.

However, the government has called their existence illegal and has pressured their members to rejoin recognized municipalities. In mid-1998, the state police and Mexican army forcibly entered and dismantled four autonomous municipalities. They halted this practice to a certain degree once it had caught the attention of international human rights organizations. Yet, to this day, autonomous municipalities feel threatened and often are threatened by the overwhelming presence of security forces in the state. Well-founded human rights complaints from autonomous municipalities against state security forces and federal military forces are daily and commonplace.

In addition, there is now a religious element to the conflict that gained prominence around 1997 but dates back almost thirty years to the introduction of Protestantism and a new Catholic theology to the region. While it is clear that there are differences in theology and practice among different groups of Catholics and between Catholics and Protestants, how these differences play out is a very local phenomenon. In some communities, all faiths live together in relative peace, while in others, a mix of religious and political differences has led to harassment and expulsions. As of April 1998, Catholic churches had been destroyed, damaged or closed (and/or priests associated with the Diocese of San Cristóbal prevented from offering services) in nine

municipalities in the conflict zone and the Northern Zone.¹² Furthermore, it is in these municipalities that the worst violence of the conflict has taken place.

In the current conflict, all sides see religious and political identity as linked. According to stereotypes that many people within Chiapas hold, traditional Catholics and most Protestants are identified with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, Spanish acronym), which has held the Mexican presidency since 1929, and non-traditional Catholics primarily within the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas are identified with the left of center political opposition party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD, Spanish acronym) and the EZLN. Thus, lines are drawn between traditional Catholics-Protestants-PRI/government and Diocese of San Cristóbal-PRD-EZLN. But in truth, these relationships are stereotypes and do not always hold true.— While there are trends, the linkage depends on local circumstances.

To heighten complications, paramilitary forces began to gain force in the region in 1996. While the Mexican government denies any paramilitary forces currently operate in Chiapas, national and international non-governmental, human rights and religious organizations claim there are from 12 to 16. These forces, often affiliated with the PRI and Protestants or traditional Catholics and sometimes even with state and national security forces, act with impunity, claiming control of roads, natural resources, market access and land areas. Human rights organizations accuse them of being responsible for many of the human rights abuses in the state. The biggest atrocity to date occurred in December 1997 when a paramilitary group massacred 45 displaced indigenous men, women and children representing a nonviolent organization who, at the time of the massacre, were praying in a church in the town of Acteal. Although the government has made some advances, the case remains largely unresolved. Nonetheless, the fear that the presence of paramilitary organizations raises causes people to leave their fields untended and communities to become isolated from one another because leaving one's community and using the roads seems too treacherous. For others, fear of paramilitary organizations and/or intra-community divisions have caused massive displacement. An estimated 12,000 people are currently displaced from their homes and communities in Chiapas.

Local response

Much of the local response to the conflict came through the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The diocese already had a long commitment to the spiritual, social and physical well being of the people who were under its auspices. When human rights violations, repression and disappearances in rural areas increased in the late 1980s, the diocese created the Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. This organization eventually became independent and has been one of the most prominent promoters of human rights in Chiapas.

As the government made increasingly stronger efforts to foment religious division within the state, the diocese created the Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism in January 1995 to help leaders of Chiapas's various churches work together amicably and present a united front against the forces that wished to divide them. During the course of the first round of peace negotiations, the diocese recognized that peace must be constructed both among the leadership of the parties in conflict as well as within and among communities within Chiapas. With this in mind, in July

¹² "CIEPAC maps of the situation in Chiapas," produced by The Center for Economic and Political Investigation and Community Action (CIEPAC), San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, México, ciepac@laneta.apc.org, for Strategic Pastoral Action (SPAN), <http://www.spanweb.org/mapas.html>, Wes Rehberg, author, wrehberg@spanweb.org, February 7, 1999.

1996, the diocese created the Commission for Community Reconciliation (CORECO, Spanish acronym) whose mission it would be to help promote community-level reconciliation.

Also in response to the conflict, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chiapas created their own network dedicated to promoting peace in the region: the Coordinating Agency of Non-governmental Organizations for Peace (CONPAZ, Spanish acronym). CONPAZ provided NGOs with a forum in which they could work together to increase their effectiveness and leverage. Unfortunately, the government's concerted efforts to divide the NGO community, which exacerbated internal disagreements, eventually undermined CONPAZ's effectiveness and led to its disintegration in November 1997.

However, at least two NGOs dedicated to promoting peace in Chiapas were born out of CONPAZ. The Educational Collective for Peace (CEPAZ, Spanish acronym) formed within CONPAZ, and after CONPAZ's dissolution, it dedicated itself to peace education, human rights promotion, conflict resolution and psycho-social assistance for trauma survivors within indigenous communities affected by the conflict. The Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action (CIEPAC, Spanish acronym) was also formed by members of the mediation body CONAI and the NGO network CONPAZ. In June 1998, CIEPAC began to provide both local and international NGOs, among others, with valuable research and assessments regarding the conflict situation.

Other NGOs responded to the conflict independently of the diocese. The Civic Alliance (Alianza Cívica in Spanish) is a national network of NGOs. It opened its office in Chiapas in 1994 to promote fair elections, citizen education and a political culture of participation. In 1996, another NGO, Civil Connection (Enlace Civil in Spanish), formed in Chiapas to work in solidarity with autonomous communities, assisting them in the areas of agro-ecology, education, health and human rights.

This list of local NGOs working to promote peace in Chiapas is obviously incomplete. For example, it does not include organizations dedicated exclusively to humanitarian assistance or economic and social development although the work of both types of organizations affects the stability of communities in the state. Generally speaking, there are local NGOs working to assist Chiapas communities at most of their levels of need. However, these NGOs have trouble accessing and serving communities that support the government. In addition, without the support of people and organizations outside of Chiapas, local NGOs believe they would have difficulty drawing and maintaining national and international attention on the conflict.

International response

The EZLN and its supporters are using innovative strategies to attract international attention to the conflict in Chiapas. Within days after the conflict broke out, news of local incidents was reaching the outside world first via independent journalists but then quickly by fax and electronic mail sent by observers and supporters to an informal but vast global network of individuals and organizations that back the Zapatistas' cause. By 1995, a number of Mexican and non-Mexican organizations had established web pages exclusively devoted to the conflict in Chiapas. As a result, since the beginning of the conflict, individuals throughout the world have been able to follow daily events taking place in Chiapas's mostly rural communities. Given their online networks, they have also been able to quickly mobilize the resources necessary to call international governments' and organizations' attention to human rights abuses in the state. It is that electronic presence and resulting international support that have gained the Chiapas conflict

recognition as the first war to be fought on the Internet. They have also helped the relatively small and poorly armed EZLN continue its primarily nonviolent battle against the Mexican government for over six years.

The Mexican government, concerned by the international attention that the conflict is receiving, has reacted strongly against international intervention. It has stated repeatedly that the conflict in Chiapas is an internal affair in which international entities, out of respect for national sovereignty, should not be involved. It has established and enforced immigration policies intended to minimize the presence of international observers and others concerned with human rights in the conflict zone. As a result, international agencies find it difficult to register as legal organizations in Chiapas, and foreigners, unable to receive government permission to work in Chiapas, risk expulsion from the country if they are seen to be in any way engaging in the state's political activities, even if their goal is to help promote dialogue among divided parties.

Nonetheless, a few international non-governmental organizations were already working in Chiapas or did become involved in humanitarian assistance and peace-promoting activities in the state after the conflict began. For example, the International Committee for the Red Cross attends to the needs of the displaced, although, as expected, its work is very separate from that of other international organizations in the state. Nonetheless, it has had disagreements with the Mexican government and was forced to leave Chiapas for a period of time. Doctors of the World is also providing humanitarian assistance, again operating very much separately from NGOs focused on conflict resolution and peacemaking.

Other international NGOs present in Chiapas are members of the SIPAZ coalition: the Peace and Justice Service in Latin America (SERPAJ), Global Exchange, Witness for Peace, Christian Peacemaker Teams, the Michigan Peace Team and Peace Brigades International. The first two organizations, SERPAJ and Global Exchange, began their work in Chiapas before SIPAZ was formed, while the remaining four organizations – Witness for Peace, Christian Peacemaker Teams, the Michigan Peace Team and Peace Brigades International – only began working in Chiapas after SIPAZ was in place. SIPAZ collaborates with the first two organizations in various projects and shares visiting delegations with them. In addition to providing this sort of relationship, SIPAZ has helped the remaining four organizations design their work in Chiapas and has provided them with technical and operational assistance as necessary.

The Peace and Justice Service in Latin America (SERPAJ, Spanish acronym), a Latin America-wide faith-based network that promotes peace through nonviolent action and a founding member of the SIPAZ coalition, began its work in a community in Chiapas in 1989 in response to problems with the municipal president and land disputes. After the conflict broke out between the Mexican government and the EZLN, SERPAJ retained its presence in Chiapas through one of its individual members. However, it does not have an office in the state.

Other international peace promoting NGOs have entered Chiapas since the conflict broke out. Global Exchange, a U.S.-based NGO, began working in Chiapas in 1994 providing accompaniment for indigenous communities, human rights observation, guidance for foreign delegations and education for U.S. citizens in order to put pressure on both the U.S. and Mexican governments to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict and promote justice in Chiapas. Over the course of the conflict, Global Exchange has shifted its strategies from accompaniment and information provision to a greater focus on advocacy for legislative change within both Mexico and the United States. Global Exchange is also a founding member of SIPAZ.

Witness for Peace, a U.S. faith-based and nonviolence NGO and a member of the SIPAZ coalition, worked in Chiapas with Guatemalan refugees from 1990 to 1995 as part of its efforts to call U.S. policymakers' attention to the conflict in Guatemala and the impact of U.S. policies there. Recognizing its U.S.-based constituency's interest in the conflict in Chiapas and the relevance of U.S. policy issues in Chiapas to its mission, Witness for Peace began working directly on the conflict in Chiapas in April 1998. It invites delegations of U.S. citizens to visit Chiapas so that upon their return to the United States they can call U.S. policymakers' attention to the impact of U.S. policies in the state.

Christian Peacemakers Teams and the Michigan Peace Team, two more faith-based, nonviolence based NGOs from the United States and Canada, have been working in Chiapas since 1998 and 1999 respectively to call U.S. and Mexican policymakers' attention to the plight of communities in Chiapas. Peace Brigades International has visited Chiapas but, due to the lack of specific demand and the already existing presence of other NGOs, found no need to begin its own work in the state. Instead, it is planning to focus its energies in two other states in southern Mexico, Oaxaca and Guerrero, where similar problems exist but little international presence is felt.

International Service for Peace (SIPAZ)

- **Mission, goals and principles**

SIPAZ's origins and principles make it unique among non-governmental organizations in Chiapas. SIPAZ did not enter Chiapas with its own proposals to create peace, but was founded as an answer to the repeated requests of Chiapas-based religious and human rights organizations for a permanent international presence in the state. Its goal is to help Mexican organizations promote peace in Chiapas by using its own presence to help protect nationals working for justice, peace and human rights and by providing people outside of Mexico with information about the conflict that was not being disseminated through the press. While its activities have changed and expanded over the years, these goals have remained the same.

To achieve these goals, SIPAZ founders articulated six key principles to guide its activities. According to its Statement of Purpose, SIPAZ defines itself as, (1) pro-active, (2) supportive, (3) politically independent, (4) nonviolent, (5) international, and (6) faith-based and rooted in a deep commitment to nonviolence.

(1 & 2) Pro-active and Supportive

While strongly affirming the importance of investigating and denouncing human rights violations, SIPAZ focuses its attention on efforts to prevent or reduce violence by promoting communication between divided parties in areas where the potential for violence is present. SIPAZ's goal is to help reduce the number of human rights violations that take place within the state by helping create spaces in which these same parties can discover their own solutions to their problems.

(3) Politically independent

SIPAZ is committed to political independence for all sides in the conflict and believes that such independence is critical to its credibility as an observer and promoter of the participation of all sides in dialogue. This is a difficult position to maintain within a very divisive conflict context in which almost all other organizations do choose sides.

(4) Committed to Non-Violence

In a setting characterized by real disparity of force — the largely non-violent EZLN movement¹³ and very active violence on behalf of some military and paramilitary forces — SIPAZ's commitment to non-violence does not mean that it is allied with the largely non-violent EZLN fighters and does not contradict its commitment to political independence. SIPAZ sees its commitment to active nonviolence as a way to include all parties to the conflict as potential sources and participants in its resolution, and to expand the possible ways that people can promote justice in Chiapas.

(5) International

SIPAZ is very public about its identity as an international agency comprised of a coalition of U.S., Latin American and European-based NGOs and sees its international identity as crucial to its work in Chiapas. SIPAZ aims to bring together the concerns of organizations in many parts of the world that are in favor of a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict in Chiapas.

(6) Faith-based and rooted in a deep commitment to nonviolence

Finally, all of SIPAZ's coalition members are themselves committed to nonviolence and/or to religious faith. This personal commitment on the part of SIPAZ's member organizations is viewed by members as an energy source for SIPAZ in its ongoing work.

- **Organizational structure**

SIPAZ's organizational structure is international and collaborative at every level of its existence. The SIPAZ coalition has grown from five organizational members to close to 50 organizations that have their bases in at least 12 states of the United States and in at least five additional countries in Latin America and Europe. (See Appendix 1 for a list of SIPAZ's members.) The coalition continues to grow at a rate of a few new organizations every year. According to Phil McManus, organizations join SIPAZ because of:

“their desire to actively support efforts to secure a just and lasting peace in Chiapas and their belief that SIPAZ is making an important contribution. Their participation in SIPAZ is effective in that it allows them to join forces with others and be active on Chiapas within the limits of their organizational resources. In addition to knowing that they are contributing to important peacebuilding efforts, their participation as members also provides them with information and contacts to inform and strengthen their advocacy efforts. Just as the groups themselves contribute to creating a strong international profile for SIPAZ, perhaps... some of them benefit from achieving a greater profile by being part of SIPAZ.”¹⁴

All member organizations support SIPAZ financially and receive SIPAZ's quarterly bulletin. According to SIPAZ, 25 to 30 percent of coalition members are more active. They send SIPAZ volunteers or delegations to visit Chiapas, give SIPAZ access to their grassroots networks for the dissemination of timely information regarding the conflict, use information provided by SIPAZ to lobby policymakers in the United States, or offer SIPAZ staff members training in a variety of skill areas such as accompaniment, information gathering and dissemination or stress management. This assistance has made great contributions to SIPAZ's work in the areas of information and workshops and has also strengthened the SIPAZ Chiapas office as a team.

¹³ Since the 1994 ceasefire, EZLN members – never with the blessing of the leadership – have only resorted to violence a few times.

¹⁴ Correspondence with Phil McManus, May 10, 2000.

Ricardo Carvajal, the SIPAZ/Chiapas coordinator notes that maintaining relationships with all coalition members is not easy. Due to the complex nature of the conflict in Chiapas and the varying levels of involvement of different coalition members, it is difficult for all coalition members to understand clearly what it is that SIPAZ is doing and therefore to maximize the utility of their assistance to SIPAZ. The SIPAZ/Chiapas team has occasionally tried to increase coalition member involvement in its activities with some success, as proven by the higher levels of commitment shown by over a quarter of coalition members. Nonetheless, SIPAZ/Chiapas would like to increase the proportion of more highly committed members.

SIPAZ/Chiapas also tries to foster its relationship with its now four coalition members also working in Chiapas (Global Exchange, Christian Peacemakers, Witness for Peace, Michigan Peace Team). During 1998, SIPAZ held meetings with this group every two to three months to compare activities and offer each other guidance and support. However, as each organization's workload increased in 1999, they stopped meeting. Well aware of the value of collaboration among coalition members, SIPAZ is currently trying to get those meetings started again.

SIPAZ has three offices. The SIPAZ office in Chiapas monitors and analyzes the conflict in Chiapas, receives delegations and responds to the press, and carries out peace promoting activities in the state. The SIPAZ office in California helps with the production and distribution of SIPAZ's quarterly bulletins, spearheads specific campaigns, and communicates with SIPAZ's ever-growing number of coalition members. As of 1999, SIPAZ also has an office in Uruguay for the international outreach coordinator. The goal of this office is to expand the SIPAZ network with coalition members and other collaborators and to develop more official level contacts with government and inter-governmental organizations. Currently, SIPAZ's annual budget is approximately \$130,000 and is raised primarily from coalition members and through foundation funding. Because SIPAZ has a broad funding base, it is able to undertake activities without concern regarding donor-imposed constraints. The Chiapas office receives around 48 percent of SIPAZ's budget, while the Uruguay office receives around 18 percent and the International Office 35 percent.¹⁵ (See Appendix 2 for SIPAZ's organizational diagram.)

A steering committee made up of coalition members helps coordinate the activities of the three SIPAZ offices and helps the SIPAZ office in Chiapas run the organization and make important decisions. While most of the organizational management originally fell to the Chair of the Steering Committee, Phil McManus, and the Chiapas Office Coordinator, Ricardo Carvajal, as the organization has matured, that responsibility has begun to fall more evenly among staff members and steering committee members. In addition, the steering committee has created a number of functional committees dedicated to specific aspects of the organization's functioning, such as strategic planning and evaluation, volunteer recruitment and fundraising.

In San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Ricardo Carvajal, a Mexican national, has been SIPAZ's office coordinator since its inception. Due to a limited budget and the desire to provide a constant international presence in Chiapas, SIPAZ relies on the assistance of international volunteers to help it carry out its projects. International volunteers work with SIPAZ in Chiapas on particular project areas for a minimum of one year and sometimes as long as three years or more. Volunteers are chosen for their past experience working in conflict zones in areas such as accompaniment and human rights protection, the utility of their skills to SIPAZ's program areas, and their potential fit within the SIPAZ/Chiapas team. The fifteen volunteers who have worked with SIPAZ to date have come from nine different countries, and on average, three to five have

¹⁵ Correspondence with Phil McManus, May 10, 2000.

been present in the SIPAZ/Chiapas office at any given time. At the time of this case study, the four volunteers present came from France, Germany, Holland and Canada. In addition, SIPAZ relies on the assistance of part-time helpers, called *colaboradores*. One Mexican *colaborador* supports SIPAZ in the area of inter-religious work. Other *colaboradores* are internationals, primarily from the United States, who affiliate themselves with SIPAZ for a few months at a time to undertake research that is of interest to SIPAZ and its program areas.

In spite of a lack of a sizable, full-time staff in Chiapas, Ricardo Carvajal and the volunteers have been able to offer SIPAZ a wealth of skills over time. As a result, SIPAZ has been able to develop new areas of work and earn the respect of other organizations both in Chiapas and internationally for the quality of the contribution it makes to peace-building efforts in the state. As of the time of the case study, two volunteers were dedicated to accompaniment work, although one also gave part of her time to inter-religious work with the Mexican *colaborador*. A third volunteer was in charge of the information section, and a fourth worked with Ricardo Carvajal in the area of workshops. All of these areas are described below.

- **Areas of work**

SIPAZ seeks to assist national organizations and the people of Chiapas and tries to keep the international community informed about the events that take place within the conflict setting. With those goals in mind, SIPAZ began its work in two areas: information and international presence. Over the past five years, it has added workshops and inter-religious work to its activities as it has sought more pro-active ways to help the people of Chiapas resolve their conflicts peacefully. (See Appendix 3 for an organizational timeline.)

Information

SIPAZ produces a quarterly bulletin that contains current information about the conflict, national and international efforts to promote its peaceful resolution, and SIPAZ's activities during the three-month period that the bulletin covers. The purpose of the bulletin is to provide readers with impartial information about the conflict as a counterbalance to the biased reporting of both official and pro-Zapatista media sources. SIPAZ also produces an occasional urgent action electronic bulletin or letter asking for its readers' support in response to specific incidents. However, in spite of the almost daily opportunity to call for constituent responses to human rights violations or actions that further jeopardize the peace process, SIPAZ uses its urgent action appeals sparingly. Some of the reasons for this I describe below. Yet, in part, SIPAZ uses care in order to ensure the accuracy of its reporting, maintain its credibility as an information source, and heighten the possibility that its readers truly will respond to its urgent action appeals.

The SIPAZ team sends 2,240 hard copies and 1,400 electronic copies of the quarterly bulletin in English, and 600 hard copies and 1,000 electronic copies of the bulletin in Spanish to organizations, electronic mail listserves and individuals outside of Chiapas. These individuals and organizations use the information that SIPAZ sends to keep informed of current events in Chiapas and to plan their advocacy work in their home countries. SIPAZ also distributes 50 to 100 copies of the bulletin in English and many more copies of the bulletin in Spanish to NGOs, visiting delegations and communities in Chiapas. SIPAZ also posts its bulletins in French, Italian, Spanish and English on its website, which receives 1,500 to 1,800 visitors from approximately 40 countries every month. In addition, SIPAZ includes foreign embassies in Mexico and Mexican government offices on its distribution list, thus making itself a main source of non-governmental organization-generated conflict news that representatives of these institutions read and find

credible. Through this effort, SIPAZ hopes to enhance these representatives' understanding of the conflict as well as show the representatives how non-governmental organizations are trying to help promote dialogue.

The members of the SIPAZ Chiapas office write the articles as a team while relying on the editorial assistance of the chair of the SIPAZ Steering Committee and two other SIPAZ coalition committees located in the United States, Holland and Uruguay. This bulletin-writing system creates an unofficial mechanism for internal reflection as team and coalition members share their thoughts about the conflict and their work over the last three months – an activity that is easy to set aside for later when other seemingly more pressing tasks are at hand. SIPAZ is thoughtful about its work and uses this sort of unofficial self-monitoring and evaluation to help shape future activities.

In order to maintain its political and religious independence, its position of nonviolence, and its credibility among all parties to the conflict, SIPAZ is very careful about the words it chooses to use in its bulletins. Many words, such as peace, human rights, ecumenism, foreigner and non-governmental organization, are now so closely associated with the EZLN and those who support it that their very appearance may increase polarization among the parties to the conflict. In that same sense, the parties to the conflict have developed strong stereotypes that are difficult to overcome.

There are many human rights violations in the state that SIPAZ denounces to its broad, international audience through its quarterly bulletin and its urgent action announcements. Yet, SIPAZ faces two problems. First, both the government of Mexico and the international community require evidence that these abuses have taken place. The Mexican government and paramilitary forces have made it almost impossible for foreigners to travel to the communities in which human rights violations are taking place. When people are able to make complaints, the government often will not hear them, or will require two witnesses (both of whom must be willing to risk their lives in order to make their complaints), or is unwilling to proceed with a judicial process. As a result of all of these factors, finding justice and reducing human rights violations through publicity has proven to be a difficult task that requires careful research, corroboration of facts and diplomatic wording.

Second, SIPAZ's four areas of work are very much interlinked: what is done in one area of work has a profound impact on what can be done in the other areas. As SIPAZ tries to enter into dialogue with all parties to the conflict, it must use care as to whom it offends. For example, an article praising the work of Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas ended for a short time SIPAZ's ability to talk to Protestant church leaders for whom this sort of article diminished trust in SIPAZ as an unbiased observer and facilitator. At the same time, SIPAZ was able to publish an article in its bulletin describing the conflict in the Northern Zone in Chiapas without negatively impacting its accompaniment work there. SIPAZ's success in this instance was the result of diplomatic skill in report writing. SIPAZ stands by its principles but uses great care in determining how it will express its interests and concerns so as not to negatively impact other aspects of its work.

SIPAZ tries to strengthen its relationships with all parties to the conflict while at the same time promoting justice and human rights within the conflict setting. In its quarterly bulletins, it includes the perspectives of all people involved in the events about which it is reporting. SIPAZ has a reputation for its unique evenhandedness in that regard. While at times this attitude makes its national and international counterparts uncomfortable, these same organizations and the organizations whose work they confront recognize SIPAZ's credibility as an information source.

As a second part of SIPAZ's information work, SIPAZ receives international delegations who visit Chiapas with varying relationships to the conflict. Some are church groups or groups dedicated to nonviolence who often belong to SIPAZ's coalition members. Others are ambassadors and other embassy officials in Mexico representing such countries as the United States, Britain, Holland, Canada or Germany. It took SIPAZ a few years of quarterly bulletin dissemination and regular visits to the embassies in Mexico City to get the embassies' attention. However, now, due to SIPAZ's reputation as a credible and politically independent non-governmental organization in the conflict region, embassy officials seek out SIPAZ's assistance when they want to visit Chiapas and gain a better understanding of the conflict.

In its delegation work, SIPAZ tries to show its visitors the complexity of the conflict and the human face of all the actors involved. For example, this means that when SIPAZ explains the massacre of Acteal, it describes the plight not only of those who were killed but also of their alleged killers. SIPAZ believes that while the crimes of the killers must be denounced, the structural problems within society that made men into killers in the first place must also be addressed.

International accompaniment

International accompaniment was among SIPAZ's original strategies in response to the conflict when it began designing its work in Chiapas in 1995. Yet, for a long time there were debates on this between the SIPAZ international office in California and the SIPAZ office in Chiapas. For some, a permanent international presence in places where that was required was of utmost importance, while others felt a less frequent international presence in communities in the conflict zones was more appropriate.

Unlike during the wars in Central America in the 1980s, there is no clear call for international accompaniment in Chiapas to protect national NGOs and communities against military and other armed forces. National NGOs, led by the Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and Enlace Civil, have established Civil Camps for Peace in which nationals and internationals successfully guarantee the security of Chiapas's communities under a national umbrella. In addition, assassinations and disappearances are not as crude and open in Chiapas as they were in other countries of Latin America. Nor is the United States government so overtly involved as it was in the conflicts in Central America so as to demand an international presence as witness in the region.

In addition, the Mexican government has launched a very successful campaign discrediting international NGOs as instigators of the conflict, making it difficult for them to carry out conflict resolution activities. Finally, as the conflict has progressed and as Mexican security forces and paramilitary forces have strengthened their footholds in Chiapas, it has become increasingly dangerous for international observers to travel to the remote communities in which human rights violations take place. Due to all these elements, SIPAZ has had to be very strategic in planning international accompaniment activities.

In 1996, SIPAZ and a group of national and international NGOs decided to undertake a collaborative accompaniment project in the Northern Zone of Chiapas. Though outside the official conflict zone, it was the area in which paramilitary violence was most rampant, numbers of murders highest and NGO presence lowest. Through what they called the Northern Station for Tension Reduction and Reconciliation, these organizations hoped to help populations in the

region reduce tensions and achieve reconciliation among divided parties. They also hoped to publicize the violence being committed in the region as a disincentive for those who were responsible for it.

However, within less than a year, the NGOs involved began to realize that government supporters had tied the concepts of human rights, NGOs, and foreigners so closely to the EZLN and had so successfully accused international NGOs of fomenting violence, that their very presence in the zone exacerbated conflict rather than assuaging it. The paramilitary organization Paz y Justicia (Peace and Justice, better known as a government development agency but with full physical, economic and political control of the majority of the Northern Zone) attacked the NGOs who made up the Northern Station twice, once kidnapping and threatening to kill one of its members. After these events in 1997, the NGOs left the Northern Zone with their goals unmet.

From this experience, SIPAZ learned that collaborating with other NGOs carried the risk of jeopardizing its political independence. Because in the Northern Zone SIPAZ had worked side-by-side with NGOs that stood firmly on the side of the EZLN, the political opposition and the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, people living in the Northern Zone now assumed that SIPAZ carried the same affiliations. SIPAZ realized that it had compromised its political independence and commitment to nonviolence in the interest of increasing the impact its work could have in the Northern Zone.

In addition, near the end of 1997, the Mexican government began to crack down on foreigners present in the state, accusing them of being involved in the country's internal political affairs. The worst month was February 1998 when members of the National Migration Institute (INM, Spanish acronym) began a particularly aggressive campaign against foreigners in San Cristóbal de las Casas. After that time, while the INM became less aggressive in its searches for foreigners, the roadblocks it set up within the conflict zone and its continued willingness to send foreigners back to their home countries unexpectedly have complicated non-Mexicans' participation in accompaniment activities. In response to this change in immigration policies, SIPAZ/Chiapas has had to change its approaches to its accompaniment work, finding ways to assist Chiapas's communities within the confines set out by the INM.

For the rest of 1997 and during 1998 no non-governmental organizations carried out accompaniment work in the Northern Zone, and many non-governmental organizations leading emergency-provoked accompaniment missions in the conflict zone only accepted Mexicans on their missions, although some internationals participated at their own risk. Due to the many roadblocks that these emergency missions had to pass, including foreigners may have hindered rather than helped them in their work. SIPAZ's Mexican coordinator participated in these emergency missions, but the international volunteers who were collaborating with SIPAZ in various projects could not help SIPAZ in these specific cases. Nevertheless, international observers did continue to carry out accompaniment work in non-emergency situations.

The following is an example of how SIPAZ chooses its volunteers according to its programmatic needs. Because of INM activities in earlier years, SIPAZ had rejected an application in 1997 from a potential volunteer with years of accompaniment experience. Her skills could not be useful to SIPAZ during that time. When she applied again to join SIPAZ's volunteer team in 1999, her application coincided with a political environment friendlier to foreigners and with SIPAZ's interest in reinvigorating its accompaniment program. SIPAZ welcomed her onto the team to support this work.

By 1999 violence in the Northern Zone had somewhat subsided, and SIPAZ started developing its own accompaniment project again. SIPAZ chose the Northern Zone for its activities because of its previous experience, the lack of migration roadblocks, and the absence of an NGO presence in the zone. From its previous experience, SIPAZ had learned that being able to talk with people representing all sides of the conflict and therefore protecting its reputation as a politically independent organization were vital to its program goal of fostering an atmosphere for dialogue. Therefore, SIPAZ took on this project alone (without NGO partners) and focused first on reestablishing its reputation.

Since the beginning of 1999, members of the SIPAZ team have visited the region approximately ten times. On each visit, they stay 10 to 15 days and usually visit one community per day. Because of their human resource constraints and their understanding that the guarantee of any external presence can reduce violence, their goal is not to provide permanent accompaniment for the communities, but rather to let the population of the Northern Zone know that the international community is aware of what is happening in the region. In that manner, they hope to give the populations of the Northern Zone courage to once again move beyond the limits of their communities to tend to their fields and to visit friends in neighboring communities.

One SIPAZ volunteer noted a particular coincidence: some communities of the Northern Zone saw the SIPAZ team using the highway known to be under the control of Paz and Justicia members and therefore avoided by all others. After this had happened a few times, the SIPAZ team observed that others are now also resuming their use of the highway. Whether or not there is a direct correlation between SIPAZ's action and the new-found mobility of the communities in the Northern Zone, the truth remains that one part of life in the Northern Zone is beginning to return to normal.

Communities in the Northern Zone have become isolated from one another and the outside world as a result of their fear of paramilitary violence in the region. Paz y Justicia now largely controls the area it had sought to control, and it is beginning to realize that to attract investment to the region, violence must diminish, which it has since its height in 1996 and 1997. Yet the fear of violence remains with the communities. To counteract this, SIPAZ has primarily focused its work in the Northern Zone on carrying information from one community to the next and from organizations and communities outside of the region to those inside. As with the renewed use of the highway, the SIPAZ team hopes that as these communities receive information about the world outside their communities and have a chance to share their own news with others, they will gradually regain their courage to break their isolation from one another.

SIPAZ is also working on promoting reconciliation in the Northern Zone. As a first step in this direction, in each community it visits, SIPAZ is trying to build relations with people on all sides of the conflict, including paramilitary organization leaders, evangelicals and Catholics. That it now dialogues regularly with these opposing group leaders with the knowledge of each that it does so is quite an accomplishment according to other NGOs in Chiapas and the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas. SIPAZ has begun to gain people's trust and has begun to share information among them, thus introducing the idea of dialogue through indirect communication. Its longer-term goal is to create a space in which these opposing forces will speak directly with each other.

Meanwhile, the SIPAZ team is content with its progress in the area of accompaniment. It has deepened its own understanding of the conflict in the Northern Zone. Other San Cristóbal-based NGOs are beginning to seek out its guidance both in terms of accompaniment practices and the Northern Zone's conflict. Its accompaniment work is enriching the information it can share

through its quarterly bulletin, increasing the contribution it can make to conflict analyses. Also, through its accompaniment work, SIPAZ is able to enrich its inter-religious work by sharing the contacts it has made with a variety of religious leaders in the region. Finally, it is enhancing the knowledge of its own coalition members and visiting delegations by sharing information about the Northern Zone.

Other NGOs praise SIPAZ's accompaniment work. They recognize that few other organizations are willing to work in the Northern Zone. They also respect SIPAZ for its ability to be perhaps the only NGO able to build a relationship with the leaders of Paz y Justicia. While some NGOs wonder what SIPAZ is trying to accomplish through that relationship, others recognize the vital reconciliation work SIPAZ is undertaking by talking to representatives of all sides of the conflict. Gaining access to paramilitary group leaders has been something that national NGOs, often affiliated with EZLN supporters, have been unable to do. Yet, these national NGOs recognize that overcoming the conflict at the community level demands being able to bring all sides of the conflict to the negotiating table.

The challenge SIPAZ sees in this area of work, as well as with its inter-religious work, is being able to build trust with representatives of all sides of the conflict. According to SIPAZ, this depends on repeated visits by the same SIPAZ team members to the same communities over a long period of time. Yet, the SIPAZ team relies on the assistance of international volunteers who cannot provide that sort of continuity. The volunteers talk about the importance of overlap between old and new volunteers so that one can introduce the other, and they talk about referencing of old volunteers by new once the new volunteers take over. However, the constraints and their solutions are not ideal. SIPAZ sees that building trust also depends on managing and meeting expectations. The SIPAZ team uses great care to make sure it only promises communities things it can deliver. (That includes never promising team members will return on a specific date). Here the SIPAZ team has had more success: members of communities that it visits know that they can trust the SIPAZ team to follow through on any promise it makes.

Inter-religious work

In the beginning of 1997, SIPAZ, other NGOs and religious organizations began to respond to the fact that within communities in Chiapas, divisions that were ostensibly religious were starting to tear communities apart. They wanted to help these communities understand that their religious divisions were, at root, new manifestations of the greater EZLN-Mexican government conflict. On another level, they also wanted to show that while religious differences could be a source of conflict, religious values, although different, could also serve as a bridge to help bring divided communities back together again. Given that the word "ecumenism" was overly identified with the work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, (perceived to be closely allied with the Zapatistas) SIPAZ decided to call its efforts "inter-religious work."

Mexican religious organizations organized an inter-religious council in which representatives of different churches met to develop a culture of tolerance. The purpose of the meeting was to talk about the community-level conflicts that contained religious elements in order to help resolve them. While a variety of churches convoked these meetings, SIPAZ was a participant in them. The first two were relative successes. Although the will did not exist to carry through on accords they signed, evangelical Protestants and Catholics attended the first two meetings and reached mutually agreeable accords. In addition, the leadership of all of the churches continued talking to each other in the interim between the two meetings. The third meeting was scheduled in the immediate aftermath of the massacre at Acteal in which a primarily evangelical paramilitary

organization murdered 45 unarmed Catholics (who at the time of their deaths had been praying). Given the volatility of the situation, poor planning on the part of the meeting organizers, and the arrival of government officials who came to make accusations, the third meeting did not have the same successes as its predecessors. Yet, SIPAZ used this series of meetings as a starting point from which to develop its own area of inter-religious work.

SIPAZ's first large contribution to this area of work was through its support of the creation of the Bible School for Holistic Formation (EBFI, Spanish acronym) in December 1997. The purpose of this ecumenical Bible school is to promote reconciliation among Chiapas's divided religious communities. The school's founders include people representing most of the different churches that exist in Chiapas. The hope is that religious leaders from those same churches will attend the school's courses together and carry the lessons they learn back to their communities. A member of the SIPAZ team participates on the school's advisory council, while other SIPAZ team members have helped give classes on conflict resolution. Gradually, SIPAZ is moving into a strictly advisory role with the school, as EBFI becomes more able to sustain itself and train its own teachers.

SIPAZ had planned to write a document describing the complex manifestations of the conflict among members of different churches, whose disagreements have led to expulsions from communities, threats and deaths. This has not happened due to changes and excessive demands on SIPAZ's small staff. SIPAZ had also planned to produce a series of pamphlets for use with the communities of Chiapas that would describe the variety of churches that exist in Chiapas and their relationships with other churches in each community. In order to get the information however, the SIPAZ team had envisioned surveying members of various communities — which is very difficult to carry out in the atmosphere of distrust that exists in the state. Thus, SIPAZ intends to focus on first gaining the trust of community members, especially evangelicals, during the current year and then revisit the idea of producing the popular pamphlets.

As of January 2000, the SIPAZ team members involved in the second task are continuing to develop contacts in Chenalhó, a municipality identified as a plausible focus for SIPAZ's inter-religious community-based work given its accessibility and the number of religious divisions that exist there. SIPAZ's hope is to eventually build enough trust with leaders of the different churches that it will be able to be a conduit of information among the different leaders, and over the long term be able to bring them together to talk directly. At the moment, SIPAZ has made contact with evangelical Protestant and Catholic leaders in the community and has had the opportunity to pray with each. SIPAZ and religious organizations familiar with its work agree that this itself is an important and unusual accomplishment and the beginning of a solid basis for the work ahead.

However, SIPAZ sees a number of obstacles in its inter-religious work. As with its accompaniment work, being able to build trust with the indigenous communities it is trying to work with is critical. Because any non-community member is considered an outsider, SIPAZ team members must devote much time and energy to building relationships with the indigenous populations they hope to help.

Second, SIPAZ is concerned that its accomplishment to date in gaining an audience with both sides of the religious divide, while very important, is precarious and could be easily disrupted. Over the longer term, SIPAZ hopes to have the opportunity to show each side that it shares many concerns with the other which could be a basis for reconciliation. However, SIPAZ expects this to be a lengthy process and in the meantime fears that, while that trust is being built, either

side could suddenly perceive SIPAZ as a spy or traitor and the progress made so far could be quickly undone.

Meanwhile, as SIPAZ continues to develop this municipal-level of work, it also continues to collaborate with religious organizations and other NGOs. In May 1998, SIPAZ, along with other religious leaders in Chiapas, presented a document appealing for an end to violence in Chiapas. In August 1999, SIPAZ joined the Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism in the organizing of a two-day inter-religious meeting in San Cristóbal and inter-religious activity in Acteal and San Cristóbal de las Casas. In November 1999, it drafted and circulated a document recognizing the peace work of Bishop Samuel Ruíz that nearly 300 international religious leaders from 27 countries signed. While these activities themselves did not bring about visible changes, through all of these activities SIPAZ has shown its dedication to inter-religious work, its commitment to collaborate with other organizations in this area, and the respect it receives from religious leaders both nationally and internationally.

SIPAZ also continues to lead delegations of religious leaders on visits to Chiapas. To coincide with the celebration of 40 years of Bishop Ruíz's service to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in January 2000, SIPAZ organized an inter-religious delegation to visit Chiapas to promote ecumenical collaborations in Mexico City, in Chiapas and particularly in divided and wounded communities of Chenalhó. SIPAZ envisions a number of purposes for these delegations. First, because the international delegations contain representatives from a variety of churches, their presence together serves as an example for Chiapas's religiously divided communities that coexistence and tolerance are possible. Second, delegation members can become aware of the extraordinary complexity of the situation in Chiapas. Third, longer-term collaborations might arise between international delegation members and religious institutions in Chiapas such as the Bible School for Holistic Formation.

Workshops

In the beginning of 1996, SIPAZ observed that the number of inter- and intra-community conflicts in Chiapas was increasing. So that these conflicts would not become obstacles in the peace process, SIPAZ decided to offer indigenous communities training in conflict transformation techniques in addition to its other areas of work. However, SIPAZ recognized that as an international organization, it would be difficult to find acceptance and trust to serve as a mediator in the communities in which the conflicts were taking place when cultural and linguistic divides existed. In addition, its methodology required translation and adaptation to be relevant to indigenous languages and culture, and SIPAZ did not have the human resources necessary to carry out that task. Therefore, instead of trying to work directly with indigenous communities, SIPAZ chose to train NGOs in conflict transformation methodologies so that they, in turn, could share the skills they gained with the indigenous communities with which they worked.

While SIPAZ investigated how it would develop its own capacity to present conflict transformation-related workshops, it relied on the skills of outsiders to begin training the local NGOs. SIPAZ invited John Paul Lederach of the Eastern Mennonite University and David Hartsough of Peaceworkers to visit Chiapas and give SIPAZ's first conflict prevention workshops to a group of local human rights organizations. A representative of SERPAJ/Tabasco presented an additional workshop on active nonviolence. Meanwhile in 1997, Ricardo Carvajal and another SIPAZ team member attended a session at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at the Eastern Mennonite University. Simultaneously, Ricardo Carvajal is earning his master's degree in psychotherapy with a focus on Gestalt out of which he is developing some of SIPAZ's

workshops. Also in 1997, a new volunteer arrived to collaborate with SIPAZ in this area of work. She would later attend various sessions at the Summer Peacebuilding Institute. In addition, SIPAZ team members continue to receive shorter training in various conflict transformation practices through a number of institutions in Mexico.

SIPAZ gained recognition quickly as the first NGO in the region to focus its work on the transformation of conflicts. In December 1997, SIPAZ facilitated its first workshop on “managing fear” for a few NGOs working in the Northern Zone. By 1998, SIPAZ was receiving significant numbers of requests from non-governmental and community organizations to facilitate conflict transformation workshops. Leaders of some NGOs in Chiapas claimed that their staff members found SIPAZ’s assistance so valuable that they never missed the monthly workshops that SIPAZ held for peace-promoting organizations in San Cristóbal. However, based on the outcome of the various workshops it was facilitating and the demands it was receiving, it was clear to SIPAZ that what it was accomplishing was slightly different from its originally intended goal.

SIPAZ had hoped that through its workshops it would train trainers who would serve as multipliers of conflict transformation methodologies in the communities in which they worked. In that sense, SIPAZ would be supporting the peace process by helping build peace from below. One NGO, CEPAZ, is indeed adapting SIPAZ’s training materials in order to teach indigenous communities conflict transformation techniques. In addition, SIPAZ has provided some workshops directly to members of community organizations. Those workshops have helped their participants improve their conflict transformation skills.

Yet, the majority of non-governmental and religious organization leaders who were participating in SIPAZ’s workshops, rather than using the skills they learned to train others, were using their new tools to help change their own attitudes and behaviors and to resolve conflicts internal to their organizations. SIPAZ believes that this is due to a need for organizational strengthening among NGOs in Chiapas, which must take place before these NGOs are able to use the skills SIPAZ teaches to promote peace within the communities in which they work, and that NGOs must be able to model the techniques and atmosphere they are trying to teach. While this came as a surprise to the SIPAZ team, the team soon recognized that by helping second-level organizations and their members improve their own understandings of conflict and how they respond to it, they were also helping them improve their interactions with the communities in which they worked and made their work more effective. With that analysis, SIPAZ accepted its role as a strengthener of NGOs dedicated to overcoming violent conflict in Chiapas.

In 1998 and 1999, SIPAZ offered monthly workshops on conflict analysis and nonviolent practices to members of non-governmental and religious organizations primarily based in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Upon request SIPAZ offered workshops within the Bible School of Holistic Formation, to youths from a preparatory school, youth groups and missionaries from the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas interested in improving their understanding of nonviolent conflict transformation techniques, and to other non-governmental organizations interested in improving their internal institutional dynamics. SIPAZ also helped other non-governmental organizations, such as La Casa de la Ciencia, Alianza Cívica and CEPAZ, develop their own conflict transformation-oriented workshops appropriate to their institutional goals and the communities with which they work.

In many of these series of workshops, SIPAZ focused on a cycle of topics that began with individual internal exploration (self-esteem), moved to group dynamics (communication, teamwork), advanced to include broader concepts (values and commitments, power and leadership), and finally looked at system dynamics (negotiation, mediation, how to confront and

prevent conflicts, towards a culture of inclusion and tolerance). SIPAZ's goal through this cycle was to help workshop participants transform their perceptions and modes of interaction. In other workshops, SIPAZ explored conflict analysis and strategies for peace. In these workshops, SIPAZ helped workshop participants broaden their understandings of the conflict context and reflect on how different activities could help bring about peace.

Having realized the tremendous demand that exists for their workshops and recognizing the limited nature of their human resources, the SIPAZ team has begun the year 2000 with a systematization and reevaluation of its workshops. SIPAZ is going to focus its conflict transformation workshops more on the needs of organizations that are working directly in indigenous communities so that they can share SIPAZ's methodology and thus help communities better understand and resolve their local-level conflicts. As a second objective, SIPAZ will produce and disseminate training materials that could help SIPAZ further extend the reach of its conflict transformation methodology. Finally, SIPAZ will promote internal reflection regarding the transformation of conflicts and nonviolence within its own team to increase its own organizational capacity to work in this area. With each of these strategies, SIPAZ is looking for ways to increase the impact its conflict transformation methodologies have within organizations and communities in Chiapas.

Ricardo Carvajal notes that while SIPAZ's workshops have a quantitatively small impact on the peace process, they are significant in qualitative terms. SIPAZ believes that, through its workshops, a number of non-governmental and religious organizations in Chiapas have undertaken a more critical conflict analysis through which they are better able to appreciate the human faces of all sides of the conflict. Participants in SIPAZ's workshops are developing their own conflict transformation language. In addition, SIPAZ has witnessed attitudes and methods of communication gradually changing within organizations as organization members have attended SIPAZ's monthly workshops. Individuals who had little to do with each other previously are now beginning to talk with one another.

Participants in SIPAZ's workshops praise SIPAZ's ability to understand the needs and goals of the organizations for whom it is providing its workshops and its corresponding ability to adjust the workshops quickly to respond to those needs. They also praise SIPAZ's ability to present new perspectives on familiar topics, such as the conflict or inter-organizational relationships, in such a way that raises the consciousness of workshop participants to new ways of thinking. Thus, SIPAZ's workshops are very important to other organizations as spaces for reflection and transformation.

On another level, SIPAZ is pleased that other NGOs and religious organizations are beginning to appreciate SIPAZ's position as a politically independent organization committed to nonviolence. These positions have granted SIPAZ moral authority within the NGO community in Chiapas, and as a result, organizations seek out SIPAZ's assistance with their own workshops, assessments and training programs. And perhaps most importantly, because other NGOs admire the conflict transformation workshop methodology that SIPAZ has developed, they request SIPAZ's assistance designing their own methodologies, developing projects, and planning and facilitating events.

Local feedback

In order to understand how outside organizations perceived SIPAZ and its work, I wanted to interview other NGOs, religious organizations, government officials and international embassy

personnel. Although SIPAZ and I made a concerted effort to contact representatives within a number of embassies in Mexico, a government office and the National Commission for Human Rights, I was unable to interview people within these entities. Unfortunately, I did not spend any time in Mexico City where these organizations have their offices but neither could I get telephone, fax or e-mail interviews with them. Part of the reason for my failure probably lies in my lack of time spent in Mexico City. The other part may lie in the extreme division that exists between government and non-governmental organizations within the context of this conflict. Upon my return to the United States, I had the opportunity to meet an official from Mexico's Interior Ministry whose work is dedicated to resolving the conflict in Chiapas. From our discussion, it was clear that the majority of federal government officials, having concluded that NGOs are really "AGOs or anti-governmental organizations," have dismissed at least for now the possibility that NGOs might be able to play a serious role in peacemaking in Chiapas. While he was familiar with SIPAZ as an NGO working in Chiapas, he claimed to have no further knowledge of SIPAZ's work.

Due to the limitations of my visit, the outside impressions of SIPAZ that I present here are based solely on the input of other NGOs and religious organizations with offices in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas. The following commentaries on SIPAZ come out of interviews I conducted with 12 of these non-governmental and religious organizations. (See Appendix 4 for a list of the organizations interviewed.)

According to SIPAZ's colleagues in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, SIPAZ's first distinguishing characteristic among non-governmental organizations in Chiapas is that it is an international organization. To them, this means that SIPAZ is better able to attract international attention to the conflict, disseminate outside of Mexico information and analysis distinct from that which is presented in the media, and influence other international organizations and governments. As an international witness with international contacts, SIPAZ can offer protection to national non-governmental organizations and communities in Chiapas. It also serves as a bridge connecting international and local entities and individuals. For example, when SIPAZ receives international delegations — whether from NGOs, religious groups or embassies — it includes local NGOs in these visits and gives them opportunities to make presentations to the visiting delegations.

However, they also note that as it is not easy to maintain international interest in a prolonged low-intensity conflict, SIPAZ must dedicate much of its energy to that endeavor. At the same time, because of the limits the Mexican government has placed on the work of international NGOs and foreigners in Chiapas, SIPAZ must use care in choosing its activities. It is difficult for international organizations such as SIPAZ to work in communities in the conflict zone. For that reason, at times it is also difficult for international organizations to serve as effective witnesses and protectors against human rights violations. Local NGOs believe that international organizations must weigh their strengths against the limitations placed upon their work in order to make the most of their presence in Chiapas. SIPAZ pointed out that one example of how national and international organizations in Chiapas have accomplished this was through the creation of the Civil Camps for Peace mentioned earlier. These camps created a structure through which local NGOs and members of NGOs could work around the limitations placed upon them by migration authorities and continue to offer Chiapas's communities a degree of protection through their presence.

As a second important characteristic, local NGOs and religious organizations note that SIPAZ is unique in being formed out of a coalition of organizations. Again, this offers SIPAZ a guaranteed network for the dissemination of reports and other information. This same network can lobby governments during emergencies or can be called together for meetings. The coalition also offers

SIPAZ diverse sources of funding and other types of support, such as training or volunteers, while at the same time demanding accountability. Yet, each member of the coalition has a different level of commitment to SIPAZ, which must find ways to maximize the contribution of as many coalition members as possible.

SIPAZ's colleagues in Chiapas see SIPAZ as successful in adhering to its principles of political neutrality, ecumenism and nonviolence. As a result, SIPAZ can seek out people representing all sides of the conflict and can help create space in which those people can meet. While some organizations still wonder why SIPAZ is talking with representatives of paramilitary organizations, others recognize that building peace requires involving all parties to the conflict. Some members of other NGOs in Chiapas are even beginning to approach SIPAZ in order to learn from its example.

SIPAZ's Chiapas-based colleagues also credit SIPAZ with developing a broad understanding of the conflict and its role within it. While the majority of organizations in Chiapas, both national and international, are allied with one side of the conflict and understand the conflict from that side's perspective, SIPAZ is known for trying to understand the conflict in all its manifestations for all sides. Other NGOs find this helpful, as SIPAZ has helped broaden their understandings of the conflict through its monthly workshops. In meetings about subjects ranging from the provision of psychological services to actual conflict resolution activities, SIPAZ team members have also called the attention of other NGOs to the needs of all people living in Chiapas by suggesting that they work with people affiliated with all sides of the conflict. This is a radical suggestion according to many working in a wide variety of fields in Chiapas.

Amongst NGOs in Chiapas, SIPAZ is seen as embracing a great variety of themes within its work — information dissemination, accompaniment, human rights promotion and conflict transformation. As a result, it has become an important point of reference for many organizations as they seek to better understand the conflict or develop new areas of work. In that sense, SIPAZ fits in with all organizations in Chiapas, yet, at the same time, it fits completely with none. This latter aspect can be a source of frustration for other organizations in Chiapas that wish that SIPAZ would involve itself as other organizations do in specific activities, such as public denouncements, that are not part of SIPAZ's mandate or that could jeopardize SIPAZ's work in other areas. Instead, SIPAZ chooses to respond to the need for denouncements and other such events in ways consistent with its mandate and organizational character.

Local NGOs and religious organizations observe that, while SIPAZ mobilizes international public opinion to denounce human rights violations outside of Mexico, it maintains a low profile in Mexico. Some NGOs wish that SIPAZ would raise its profile within Mexico to denounce human rights violations more loudly such as through press conferences when the need arises. However, other NGOs understand that a higher profile would not serve SIPAZ's goals inside the country. In their opinion, SIPAZ is a humble organization that recognizes that the appropriate role of NGOs is to quietly support the work of the grassroots-based civil society organizations. SIPAZ team members also observe that to raise SIPAZ's profile in certain instances can jeopardize SIPAZ's image as a politically independent organization and destroy the trust it has built with certain sides of the conflict. SIPAZ believes that while there are other organizations willing to denounce human rights violations loudly within Mexico, it can accomplish more in the country by maintaining conversations with as many factions as possible.

Local NGOs and religious organizations spoke about SIPAZ's heavy reliance on the assistance of international volunteers. This role of international volunteers is seen as positive because they bring experiences from different conflict settings to share with SIPAZ and other NGOs, and new

ideas and possibilities through their different cultures and perspectives. As well, their contacts in their home countries are often eager to support peace work in Chiapas, and they are capable of interesting their ambassadors in Mexico in the Chiapas conflict. Furthermore, because they are not from the region, they offer another level of credibility to the information that SIPAZ gives the international delegations that visit and they also help SIPAZ maintain its politically independent posture by being somewhat removed from the pressure to take sides in the conflict.

Yet, some local organizations also note that it is difficult for an outsider to understand the extraordinarily complicated conflict in Chiapas and know how best to work within it in a short time period. In their opinions, promoting peace is a full-time and long-term job, not well suited for people who are making a temporary visit to a conflict area. Thus, they believe that SIPAZ should find more ways to create continuity across volunteers through a well-developed institutional memory and overlap between old and new volunteers. As noted earlier, SIPAZ has tried to address these issues from the beginning — requiring a minimum of a one-year commitment (some have stayed as long as three years) and trying to ensure overlap so that training and introductions are made. But finding qualified people willing to make a very long-term commitment to working in the field is a common difficulty for many organizations engaged in conflict work

In fact, SIPAZ has been very successful at attracting extremely experienced and talented volunteers to collaborate with it. According to SIPAZ and some other NGOs in Chiapas, what the volunteers lack in the length of their stays, they offer in their vast skills and their ability to adapt quickly to their projects and the new setting. In addition, they have repeatedly shown their generosity in their willingness to share their knowledge and experience not only with SIPAZ but also with other NGOs in Chiapas. Thus, through their presence, they help to strengthen the capacities of the NGOs around them.

The SIPAZ team, including the volunteers, lives together in community. Thus, their work is also their life. According to one outside observer, this can either be the greatest strength behind their efforts or the cause of SIPAZ's destruction. In her observation, when the SIPAZ team lives in internal harmony, it is better able to promote reconciliation among divided parties. However, if dissension ever exists among the team members, this has a negative impact on the conflict transformation-oriented projects they are trying to advance. SIPAZ notes that to ensure the health of its community and therefore the effectiveness of its work, the SIPAZ team always tries to set aside time for building internal relationships and support mechanisms. By doing so, the team not only teaches reconciliation but also becomes an example of reconciliation — an example much more powerful than any words team members could say.

Generally speaking, other NGOs perceive SIPAZ to be skilled in planning, organizing and teamwork, well coordinated and dedicated to its work. In addition, they see SIPAZ as generous with its resources and knowledge and humble in its role as supporter of others' activities. These qualities are unusual among NGOs that are usually competing for funding and recognition and, thus, earn SIPAZ a high regard among its counterparts in Chiapas. One local NGO leader notes that when peacemaking-oriented NGOs in San Cristóbal need to meet, they most frequently choose to meet in SIPAZ's office. She observes that SIPAZ is organized and knows how to run a meeting. In addition, SIPAZ provides a neutral space in which NGOs that often are at odds with one another can get together comfortably.

Of the many events and activities that SIPAZ has helped organize, local NGOs in Chiapas remarked on the impact of two in particular. In October 1998, SIPAZ organized an exhibition and a series of events in honor of Gandhi and his active nonviolence in India. Through this effort,

SIPAZ inspired other organizations in Chiapas, teachers and students to think about active nonviolence as a realistic strategy for bringing about change.

The second was a reflection and discussion group, created by CORECO with SIPAZ participating, called the “Space for Civil Organizations for Peace and Reconciliation”. Approximately six primarily national, non-governmental and religious organizations met on a regular basis for a period of one year to discuss the conflict, each organization’s ongoing activities, and ways the organizations could support each other emotionally as well as through collaborations in specific projects. Unfortunately, the participants in the meetings were not able to advance very far in their work together because of differences that separated them. They could not agree on the most appropriate role for NGOs: were they primarily meant to support grassroots-based civil society organizations or was it their role to undertake their own initiatives?¹⁶ Were they allowed to bring their own proposals to civil society organizations, or must they limit their activities to providing these same organizations with spaces in which to work and methodologies? They also differed in their postures toward the government: some did not want to have any interactions with government entities, while others were open to such interactions, and still others were open to such interactions as long as their position was clear. With these arguments separating them and not enough holding them together, the group eventually disbanded. Yet, those who participated in it are hopeful that such a group could form again and make greater advances than it made the last time.

Most of the non-governmental and religious organizations I interviewed expressed a desire to see greater collaboration among themselves. They see collaboration as essential to increasing the impact they can have on the conflict in Chiapas. Yet, they also recognize that the differences that separate them are great. Their questions are the same ones that were raised within the “Space for Civil Organizations.” Yet, they are also aware of deeper divisions that they are hesitant to discuss: jealousies, distrust, prejudices and competition among the various organizations. They fear that by discussing these themes they might lose their funding, relationships, reputations, the thematic areas in which they work and the communities they serve.

Some of the organizations would like to revive a reflection and discussion group in which they can safely discuss these fears and share information about their respective goals and strategies in order to overcome their divisions and promote collaboration. This would be a permanent affiliation in which the collaborating organizations would set aside time for internal relationship building so as to create a firm foundation out of which their joint activities could grow. Some organizations see SIPAZ, with its experience in helping organizations reconcile conflicts and build internal teams, as the organization with the skills to create such a group. However SIPAZ chooses to respond to this request, I believe that it is the highest compliment that SIPAZ’s counterparts could bestow on SIPAZ: for them SIPAZ carries the moral authority and the trust necessary to undertake such a delicate task.

Conclusions

Most generally speaking, SIPAZ’s goal is to support local efforts to achieve a “dignified, just and lasting peace” in Chiapas. To accomplish this goal, SIPAZ seeks to foster an environment in

¹⁶ In Mexico there is a distinction between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). The latter are grassroots membership organizations, while the former, although national or even from the same state, are perceived as outsiders and are at least one step removed from community-level activities. Defining the most appropriate role for NGOs in Mexican society is the source of an ongoing national debate.

which dialogue is possible and to disseminate timely and well-documented information both locally and internationally in order to educate a variety of constituencies about the conflict. The primary impacts of its work have been the following:

1. Through its accompaniment and inter-religious work, SIPAZ has begun to build the base for future reconciliation work by gaining access to all sides of the conflict in the communities in which it works. This is the first important step that SIPAZ must take in order to later help opposing sides come together for dialogue as SIPAZ pursues a strategy of building peace from the bottom up.
2. Through its workshops, SIPAZ has helped strengthen local NGOs' organizational capacities and their abilities to teach conflict transformation techniques to the community-level organizations with which they work. Thus, SIPAZ's workshops have had a positive effect on an unexpected level — the organizational level — and are beginning to have a positive effect on community-level organizations as well through such NGOs as CEPAZ.
3. Finally, through SIPAZ's information distribution, international embassies, NGOs and religious organizations, among others, trust SIPAZ to provide them with credible, thorough and balanced reports regarding the conflict in Chiapas. That international embassies are now interested in visiting Chiapas to learn more about the conflict and that they turn to SIPAZ to help them plan their visits is proof that SIPAZ is very effectively building a bridge between local organizations in Chiapas and international policymakers.

Challenges for peacemaking

I believe that SIPAZ's experience provides some interesting lessons that may have broader applications for other international NGOs that are trying to promote peace in conflict settings. In the following pages, I describe the lessons that I believe to be most salient.

- **The most appropriate roles for international non-governmental organizations in a conflict setting can be very different from those most appropriate for national organizations.**

While national organizations in Chiapas that support the EZLN's cause have used the Internet and other forms of mass media very effectively to publicize events taking place in the state, international organizations have the advantage of being better able to attract world attention to the conflict through their already well-established international contacts. SIPAZ, like Global Exchange and Witness for Peace, among other international NGOs, has a large grassroots network outside of Mexico. It has also successfully used its international status to get the attention of international embassy personnel in Mexico and international policymakers. Because of these contacts, international groups often choose SIPAZ to guide their delegations on visits to Chiapas. SIPAZ has been able to use this leverage to help national NGOs gain international audiences. The resulting international attention on the conflict, due to the work of SIPAZ and other NGOs, which is combined with the Mexican government's concern about its international image, has encouraged the Mexican government to seek a negotiated rather than a military settlement to the conflict. This attention has also provided some protection to national organizations and people working and living in the conflict zone.

Yet, in the case of emergency accompaniment work in Chiapas, international organizations must also use care. As seen in SIPAZ's early experience in the Northern Zone, if parties to the conflict associate international organizations with one side of the conflict, then the very presence of those international organizations can raise tensions. In addition, if government officials do not want international interference in the conflict zone, then finding ways to assist national organizations and populations living in the conflict zone can demand creativity and flexibility. In this sense, SIPAZ volunteers have chosen their geographic areas of work carefully and have had to be flexible in shaping their programmatic strategies in order to respond to the changing political climate. This has been most clearly seen in the areas of accompaniment and inter-religious work.

SIPAZ believes that it, as an individual international organization, has been able to maximize the impact of its projects in Chiapas in spite of the limitations it faces. In fact, according to Phil McManus, SIPAZ has been able to maintain contacts with the government and has continuously informed the government about its activities without suffering negative repercussions. Why this is, is open to speculation. Some attribute it to SIPAZ's political independence and openness to talking to representatives of all sides of the conflict. Others attribute it to SIPAZ's willingness to engage the government, as seen in its sharing of its bulletins with government authorities. However regardless of the cause, according to Phil McManus, "SIPAZ, as an international coalition, has managed to claim the political space necessary to carry on [its] work."

In addition to winning political space in which to operate, international NGOs must also win the trust of their national counterparts. According to local NGOs in Chiapas, national organizations and individuals living in the conflict zone can have a difficult time trusting international NGOs because, regardless of the length of time the international organizations plan to stay, they are perceived to be transient. This makes it more difficult for international NGOs to work in such long-term and sensitive areas as inter-community reconciliation. To counteract this, SIPAZ has had to devote time and energy to building relationships with national organizations and individuals in order to establish trust and "win their place" among organizations working in the area.

- **Relying on international volunteers to carry out program activities offers the benefit of access to international networks and new ideas but presents the challenge of maintaining program continuity crucial for peacework.**

SIPAZ and its counterparts in Chiapas compliment SIPAZ's volunteers for the vast experience and dedication they bring to their work in Chiapas. SIPAZ's volunteers have also been instrumental in helping SIPAZ forge relationships with a number of international embassies in Mexico City. Yet, in a climate of tremendous distrust and in the area of peacemaking, which relies on long-term commitments, SIPAZ has had to find ways to ensure that it can achieve its goals using the human resources it offers. SIPAZ has identified and addressed this challenge well. The volunteers dedicated to accompaniment and inter-religious work are careful to design their activities in accordance with the time and resources they have to carry them out, to only make promises they can fulfill, and to establish mechanisms that help build continuity between volunteers. In addition, more permanent Mexican staff members partner with international volunteers and provide a presence in all areas of SIPAZ's work, thus ensuring continuity if there is turnover among the international volunteers.

- **Operating as a coalition of organizations offers both financial and programmatic benefits.**

SIPAZ is unusual in that it is formed out of a coalition of now more than 50 organizations. As a result, SIPAZ has a very diverse funding base that allows it to operate independent of donor constraints. In addition, SIPAZ has benefited from the resources that coalition members have been able to offer, including training, delegations and volunteers. SIPAZ would like to see a greater portion of coalition members taking on more active roles within the coalition. Yet, as I see it, there is a balance to be attained between increasing participation of coalition members and ensuring that SIPAZ can still operate efficiently unencumbered by an overly weighty chain of command.

- **Having a broad mandate can enhance the success of peacework.**

SIPAZ's broad mandate forces it to analyze the conflict on both macro and micro levels. This broad understanding of the conflict, unique among NGOs in Chiapas, helps inform its work while also proving useful to other organizations with narrower mandates and therefore narrower concepts of the conflict. Through its broad mandate, SIPAZ reinforces one area of work, such as information, with work from another, such as inter-religious work or accompaniment. Its broad mandate also encourages SIPAZ to use extra care to ensure that what it undertakes in each area of work benefits the other three, thus ensuring coherence among its various areas of work. This care has helped SIPAZ develop its reputation as a credible and reliable organization. For example, in one instance, SIPAZ used its accompaniment work in the Northern Zone to write an article in its bulletin about the situation there. The care that SIPAZ put into writing the article countered the potential polarizing effects of addressing the topic and instead gave readers a balanced and well-documented picture of a very complex situation.

- **Firmly held and clearly articulated principles can help an organization maintain its programmatic flexibility.**

SIPAZ bases its programmatic and organizational decisions on its firmly held principles of political independence, nonviolence and commitment to supporting local solutions to the conflict. This means that SIPAZ will not stray from its low-profile position in Mexico, to the dismay of some NGOs. But it also means that SIPAZ can maintain continuity in its programming while also altering its tactics in response to changes in the needs it recognizes in Chiapas. For example, SIPAZ began its workshops out of its accompaniment work in response to growing polarization within Chiapas's communities and in order to strengthen local capacities to resolve conflict nonviolently. This was a natural outgrowth of SIPAZ's commitment to fostering an environment suitable for peacemaking in the state.

- **Modeling the values it advocates strengthens an organization's credibility and therefore its peacemaking capacity.**

In all areas of its work, SIPAZ has shown how modeling the values it tries to teach in Chiapas reinforces its ability to promote peace. In the area of accompaniment, SIPAZ team members, who were trying to encourage communities in the Northern Zone to resume their interactions with each other, proved that this was possible by using the road — previously believed to be too dangerous — to walk from one community to the next. In their inter-religious work, SIPAZ team members have brought delegations including both Catholics and Protestants to visit the religiously divided communities they are trying to help. Through the presence of these delegations, community members are seeing that different religious groups can live together

harmoniously. More generally speaking, SIPAZ team members show other organizations in San Cristóbal their commitment to peace by committing to live together in community.

- **Being independent and advocating nonviolence create peacemaking opportunities not available to aligned organizations.**

In conflict settings, it is difficult for anyone to remain unaligned. As seen in SIPAZ's early experience in the Northern Zone, even if organizations do not overtly affiliate themselves with one side or another, there are always stereotypes to which they might fall victim. In addition, parties to the conflict might assume that any organization that is not with them is against them. Therefore, to insist on independence is by far the most difficult position to establish and maintain. SIPAZ has proven that it requires constant vigilance of one's own activities — as seen in the care SIPAZ puts into its bulletin writing — and frequent communication with one's counterpart organizations and those whom one serves — as seen in SIPAZ's efforts to meet more frequently with other NGOs in Chiapas and its coalition members — to ensure that one's position is clear.

Nonetheless, SIPAZ's independence is rewarded. It makes building relationships with all parties to the conflict feasible, as seen in SIPAZ's accompaniment and inter-religious work. While aligned organizations, such as most of SIPAZ's counterparts in Chiapas, are confined to helping one side of the conflict become open to seeking a negotiated settlement to its problems, SIPAZ can engage all sides of community-level conflicts in discussions that offer the possibility of eventually bringing opposing sides together. Although establishing contact with all sides to a conflict is only the first step in a long-term peace process, it is a step forward and therefore makes the effort put into establishing one's independence worthwhile.

While it is easier to promote nonviolence than it is to maintain independence, this along with independence can be difficult to defend in the conflict in Chiapas where the EZLN relies heavily on nonviolent tactics. Many local NGOs are not surprised that the system of structural violence that exists in Chiapas eventually inspired the EZLN's short, violent outburst. They also argue that it is hard to distance oneself from the EZLN, which is largely adhering to ceasefire regulations. However, some local NGOs, including SIPAZ, believe that violent alternatives hold no greater promise than nonviolent alternatives when it comes to achieving one's aims. For them, supporting active nonviolence offers more creative mechanisms for insisting on change. And hopefully, by choosing nonviolence over violence, at least one side to the conflict will be lowering tensions and making life more bearable for the populations caught living in the conflict zone. In the case of Chiapas, these NGOs realize that the use of nonviolence does not bring a speedy end to the conflict, but it does help observers understand more easily the nature of the problem and the steps necessary to resolve it.

- **When peace processes stall, non-governmental organizations should turn their attention to helping to make peace from the bottom up.**

As a SIPAZ team member pointed out, when dialogue between the primary parties to a conflict breaks down, the weight of the entire conflict falls on the population caught living in the conflict zone. In Chiapas, some populations have lost hope that a negotiated settlement to the conflict will be reached, as they become the primary victims in the ongoing low-intensity war. This, in turn, causes local-level manifestations of the conflict such as inter-religious and political divisions to increase in severity. As the case shows, when this happens, non-governmental organizations in Chiapas can help by focusing their energies on helping populations caught in the conflict build peace from the bottom up. As seen through the work of development and humanitarian assistance

organizations in Chiapas, these efforts may include economic and social development activities, which help populations meet their basic needs as well as normalize their lives. Other examples in the case show that these efforts may also include conflict transformation activities through which non-governmental organizations can help populations learn nonviolent methods for overcoming their differences. These efforts to build peace from the bottom up help local populations overcome local problems and better confront problems brought on by outside forces ranging from paramilitary activity to natural disasters.

- **Collaboration among non-governmental organizations is essential for promoting peace effectively from the grassroots up.**

As NGOs in Chiapas pointed out, regardless of the sort of peace-making or peace-building activities that they undertake, their efforts will have a greater impact if the organizations are able to collaborate with one another. They showed this on three levels. First, most non-governmental organizations in Chiapas have limited human and financial resources with which to carry out their tasks. Therefore, they believe that cooperation among non-governmental organizations offers all involved increased inputs, and hopefully, increased outputs. Second, religious organizations and NGOs in Chiapas talked about the challenge of continuing their work in spite of the pressure that government authorities place upon them. Some local NGOs, particularly those who participated in the “Space for Civil Organizations for Peace and Reconciliation,” emphasized the importance of setting up NGO support structures to help NGOs counter that pressure. Finally, NGOs in Chiapas know that if they want to influence the policies of governments and international organizations, they must be able to stand behind a single message. Unity increases credibility in the eyes of outsiders. This has been seen in the government’s continued return to pursuing a negotiated solution to the conflict in response to concerted NGO pressure and the resulting risk of negative publicity.

However, according to one local NGO in Chiapas, because non-governmental organizations compete with each other for funding, donor audiences, geographic and thematic areas of work, and populations they serve, it is often difficult for them to cooperate. They fear losing what they have and gaining very little as individual organizations as they try to increase the impact of NGOs as a whole. Yet, according to these same NGOs, they must begin discussing their fears and the burn out effect that distance them from one another and find ways to build trust among themselves so that those fears can be overcome. As a few NGOs including SIPAZ have said, this sort of conversation must become a regular part of their work together to help them build trust among themselves, increase collaboration, and thus increase the impacts of their peace-making and peace-building activities.

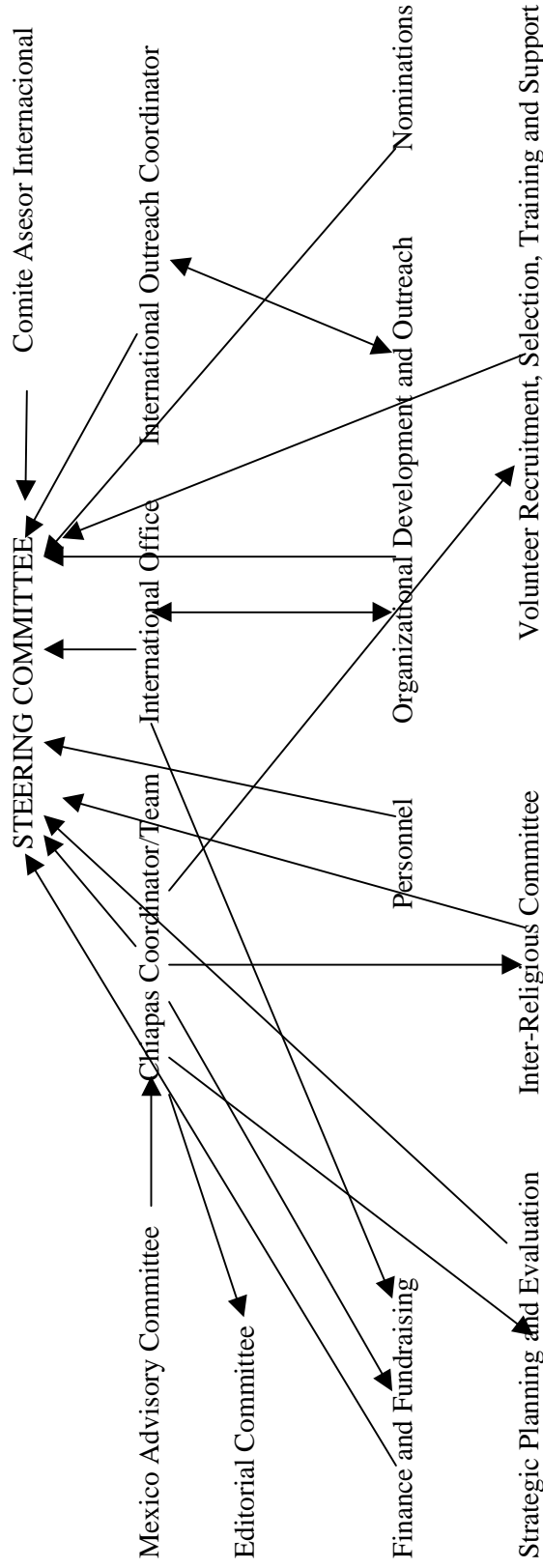
SIPAZ has offered hope in this area. Faced with limited human resources, it has focused part of its workshops on training other NGOs in conflict transformation methods, thus using collaboration to increase its impact. SIPAZ has also emphasized the need for establishing and maintaining support structures for NGOs. Its prominent role in the “Space for Civil Organizations for Peace and Reconciliation,” and its continued interest in holding regular meetings with other NGOs that form part of its coalition or that are working on similar topic areas are proof of that. In addition, SIPAZ’s ability and willingness to convene meetings in which NGOs can discuss and create unified responses to discrete events shows the importance SIPAZ places on cooperation as a means of influencing policy.

Appendix 1: SIPAZ coalition members

Adrian Dominican Sisters (Michigan, USA)
Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (North Carolina, USA)
Benedictine Sisters of Erie (Pennsylvania, USA)
Buddhist Peace Fellowship (California, USA)
Capacitar (California, USA)
Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America (North Carolina, USA)
Catholic Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Institutes, Peace and Justice Committee (Washington DC, USA)
Christian Peacemaker Teams (Illinois, USA)
Church of the Brethren (Illinois, USA)
Dominican Sisters of San Rafael (California, USA)
East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (California, USA)
Ecumenical Program on Central America & the Caribbean (Washington DC, USA)
Episcopal Peace Fellowship (Washington DC, USA)
Fellowship of Reconciliation (New York, USA)
Franciscan Friars, Santa Barbara Province (California, USA)
Franciscan National Justice, Peace and Ecology Council (Washington DC, USA)
Global Demilitarization (New York, USA)
Global Exchange (California, USA)
IF (California, USA)
International Committee for the Peace Council (Wisconsin, USA)
International Fellowship of Reconciliation (Alkmaar, The Netherlands)
Justicia y Paz (Cuenca, Ecuador)
Kentucky Interreligious Taskforce on Central America (Kentucky, USA)
Leadership Conference of Religious Women (Washington DC, USA)
Loretto Community Latin America/Caribbean Committee (Colorado, USA)
Marin Interfaith Task Force on Central America (California, USA)
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (Washington DC, USA)
Michigan Peace Team (Michigan, USA)
National Benedictines for Peace (Pennsylvania, USA)
Northern California Ecumenical Council (California, USA)
Pax Christi (Pennsylvania, USA)
Peace Brigades International (London, England)
Peaceworkers (California, USA)
Presbytery of Chicago (Illinois, USA)
Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico (Washington DC, USA)
Resource Center for Nonviolence (California, USA)
Servicio Paz y Justicia en America Latina (Montevideo, Uruguay)
Sojourners (Washington DC, USA)
Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) (Florida, USA)
Strategic Pastoral Action (SPAN) (New York, NY)
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (Massachusetts, USA)
Veterans of Foreign Wars Bill Motto Post #5888 (California, USA)
War Resisters League (New York, USA)
Washington Office on Latin America (Washington DC, USA)
Western Dominican Province (Arizona, USA)
Witness for Peace (Washington DC, USA)

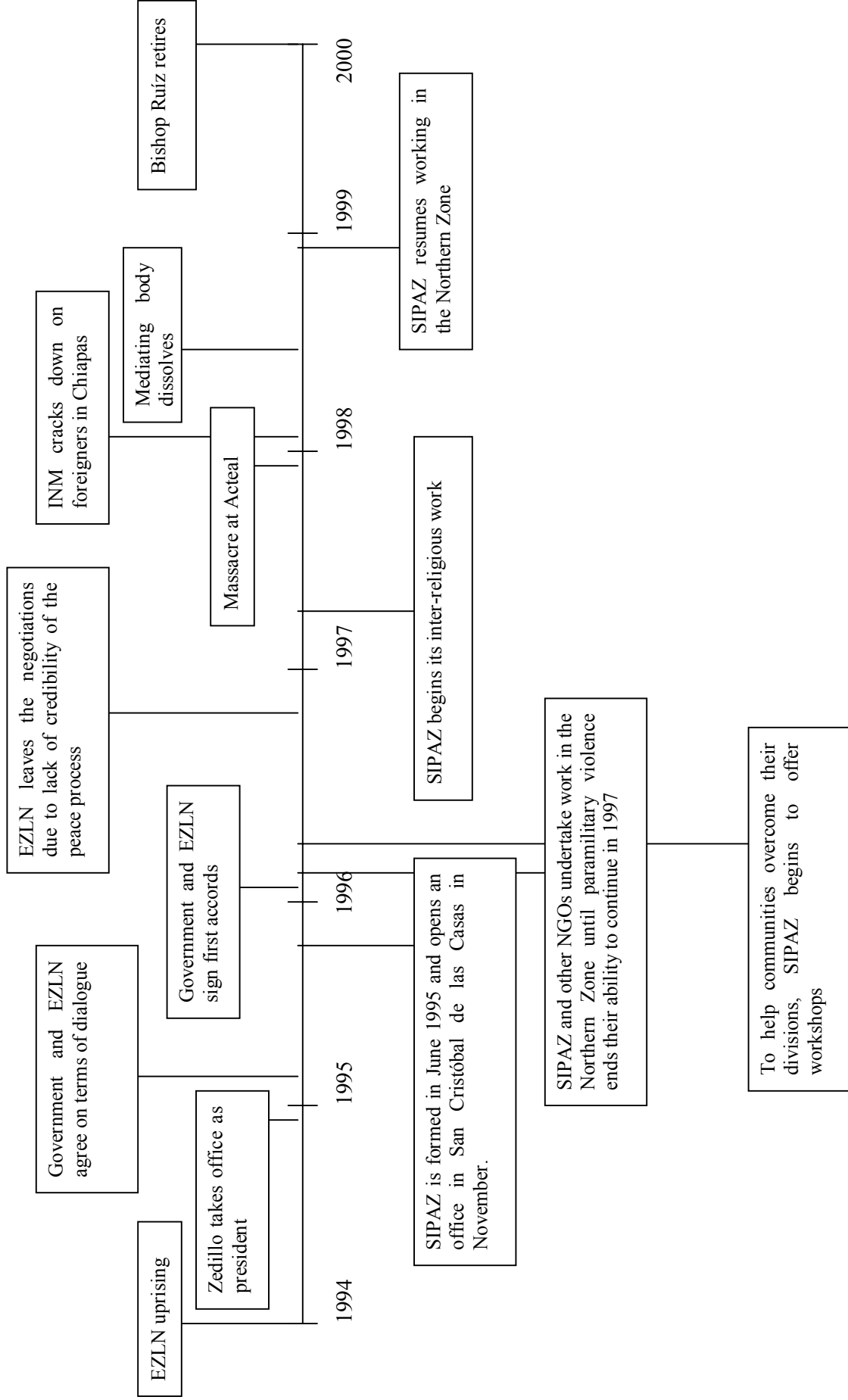
Appendix 2: SIPAZ Organizational Structure Chart

(Note: Includes 7 Steering Committee working committees. Lines and arrows indicate patterns of participation in decision making.)



The Chiapas Coordinator, the International Office Coordinator, and International Outreach Coordinator are currently ex-officio members of the Steering Committee. The International Office Coordinator is a member of the Finance and Fundraising and Organizational Development and Outreach working committees. The Chiapas Office Coordinator is a member of the Volunteer and Strategic Planning and Evaluation working committees. International Outreach Coordinator is a member of the Organizational Development and Outreach working committee. The Inter-Religious Committee includes representation from SIPAZ staff working on that area. The Editorial Committee includes team members.

Appendix 3: Organizational timeline



Appendix 4: Other non-governmental and religious organizations interviewed

Peace and Justice Office, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas

Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas

Servicio para la Paz y la Justicia en América Latina (The Peace and Justice Service in Latin America) (SERPAJ)

Global Exchange

Foro para el Desarrollo Sustentable, A.C. (Forum for Sustainable Development)

Centro para los Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de las Casas)

Comisión para la Reconciliación Comunitaria (Commission for Community Reconciliation) (CORECO)

Witness for Peace

Alianza Cívica/ Chiapas (Civic Alliance)

Colectivo Educativo para la Paz (The Educational Collective for Peace) (CEPAZ)

Enlace Civil (Civil Connection)

Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria, A.C. (The Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action) (CIEPAC)

La Casa de la Ciencia (The House of Science)