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Laurel Bellante visits a cornfield as part of her dissertation research in Chiapas, Mexico. Studying the work of a network of local, organic farmers and producers, she found that network members have been successful in defending small farmers, community economy and consumer health. (Photo: Kiri Escalante)

# How One Mexican Network Encourages Local Food Production

# UA researcher Laurel Bellante found that local and organic farmers in the Mexican state of Chiapas are crucial in driving the localization of food production, improved consumer health and organic farming.

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By La Monica Everett-Haynes, University Communications | May 26, 2017

While living and working as a magazine editor and English teacher in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, **Laurel Bellante** learned of a woman-driven network of small, organic farmers who were advancing alternative food production niche markets.



Fresh blackberries at the Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana in Chiapas, Mexico. "These grassroots movements are doing an amazing job of identifying problems and proposing solutions in terms of a small-scale, alternative food network and participatory systems," says UA researcher Laurel Bellante. (Photo: Laurel Bellante)

Bellante, who has been following the network and other Mexican farmers and producers since 2005, found that the network's members are contributing significantly to efforts to localize the growing, harvesting, sale and consumption of food in response to a growing industrialized food system.

In Chiapas, network members working at El Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana have been especially successful in negotiating competitive pricing for food, especially organic produce such as blue and white corn, ranch eggs and homemade tortillas, she said.

The network also is providing buyers with timely and relevant information about food sources to advance consumer health and better access to healthful foods, she added.

Members have created participatory certification methods to promote clean, healthful and organic products, she found, and they regularly host culturally minded open-air markets to support local farmers and producers.

"I have been compelled to tell a more optimistic story about a process of change and transformation that has been happening," said Bellante, a doctoral candidate in the University of Arizona's **School of Geography and Development** (<https://geography.arizona.edu/>) [1]. "What surprised me is that these producers are transforming the consumer landscape."

Agriculture and Human Values, the journal of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society, has published Bellante's research and findings. Her article, **"Building the Local Food Movement in Chiapas, Mexico: Rationales, Benefits and Limitations (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10460-016-9700-9>) [2],"** appears in the journal's spring 2017 issue.

With the rise of alternative food networks, commonly known as AFNs and launched in response to a corporate food regime, similar efforts are happening around the world.



Doña Reyna, a founding member of the Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana, checks on her corn in storage at her home in Teopisca, Chiapas. (Photo: Laurel Bellante)



Fresh fava beans at the Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana in Chiapas, Mexico (Photo: Laurel Bellante)

Backyard chickens in urban areas, community gardens and pesticide-free food production are among the numerous examples of this effort. Generally, such efforts are driven by ethical, moral and cultural considerations — and a desire to improve consumer knowledge about how food is cultivated and raised.

The success in the Chiapas network's ability to circumvent political and economic pressures to bolster local food systems and create a "community economy" is especially notable given decades-old changes impacting the local and global food markets. For example, the 1980s and free-trade era brought a notable shift in food production in Mexico as the government reduced agricultural supports and encouraged the privatization of how food

products are grown, harvested and distributed.

"The plummet in world oil prices in the early 1980s threw Mexico into a debt crisis that forced the country to cut agrarian programs and subsidies for the poor as part of austerity measures," Bellante said.

"Perishability is one of the most important reasons why you need a local food movement. If you are an industrial producer, you can develop an international market and your goods can be on shelves for weeks, months and maybe even years. But if you are a small-scale lettuce producer, you need to get your food to

market and sell it with a very short turnaround."

As a consequence, local and regional farmers in Mexico — especially those in isolated rural areas — have a more difficult time getting their produce to market.

"This is particularly relevant given the current international political and economic climate," Bellante said. "This raises important questions about the role of local food initiatives as a strategy for protecting Mexico's food security and food sovereignty in a volatile international political climate. These efforts to defend and expand healthy and diverse local food production take on new meaning when sudden political and economic shifts reveal vulnerabilities in the globalized food system."

The Chiapas network members — among them are mothers, food security activists and those connected with local universities — are not only carving out space for organic, local foods, but they are doing so in a way that preserves historic, indigenous and family-minded food traditions.

"Each one of these markets has its own history of how and why it emerged," she said, adding that these hybrid cultural spaces total about 30 in Mexico. The organizers work most often with producers growing without wastewater who are invested in soil and biodiversity conservation and family farming.

"The link is back to the convention of respecting the earth and maintaining the land and doing so in ways that are culturally, economically and socially sound," Bellante said.

She does have a number of critiques. For example, while the network has introduced positive change in the local food movement, it remains available to those farmers with the best means to participate.

Despite local efforts to defend small-scale, organic producers, limitations still exist, she said.

"At the end of the day, these alternative food networks still rely on market mechanisms to function and are therefore vulnerable to some of the same pitfalls as any other market-based mechanism for social change," Bellante explained.

"The literature on different AFNs and local food movements internationally demonstrates that for these movements to grow and be successful on a larger scale, government action is often paramount," she said, noting that in Brazil, for example, government supports of such networks have been key.

"It's not a black-and-white issue. It is actually filled with ambiguity," Bellante said. "So, I consider my research to be part of deepening this discussion of what role a local food movement has in producing food justice in our society. And thinking about justice broadly, not just producer justice, but also environmental and consumer justice."

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**Links:**

[1] <https://geography.arizona.edu/>

[2] <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10460-016-9700-9>