A Livelihood for the Maya: The Viability of Milpa in Rural Quintana Roo, Mexico

Moure, Sol
M. Sc. Development Practice former student, Trinity College Dublin, Ecuador,
mourepem@tcd.ie

Rural poverty has gained great attention for attaining poverty reduction goals, with growing emphasis on people's livelihoods. Policies and development programmes oriented to alleviate rural poverty ought to understand better the priorities of the people they seek to assist, the assets they have and the contextual incentives and barriers that shape their livelihood choices. When the rural context is that of an indigenous community, the cultural norms, values and identities play a role in the definition of the kind of development they want and the means to walk that path. Understanding this can lead to projects more attuned to the livelihood strategies of the indigenous poor, and therefore more accurate and effective in reaching them.

This study focuses on the traditional livelihood of the Maya: the Milpa, a natural resource management and production system based on rain-fed, slash-and-burn subsistence agriculture with a strong cultural significance. We centre our analysis in the rural communities of Felipe Carrillo Puerto (FCP), the Mayan Zone of Quintana Roo, in Mexico. Our aim is analyse the viability of the Milpa as a sustainable rural livelihood (SRL) in this context. The newness of a research like this in the context where it was developed calls for an exploratory and inductive approach: instead of departing from a hypothesis of whether Milpa is or not a viable SRL, we gathered and analysed a vast amount of qualitative and quantitative data to generate evidence-based hypotheses as conclusions.

Fieldwork research was carried out for this study in two villages. A semi-structured survey applied to 23% of households in both communities provided information on household demographics and assets, detailed farming practices and livelihood strategies, as well on opinions on Milpa productivity, uptake and improvements. Due to the nature of the data collected, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to analyse it: Stata 13.1 was used for statistical analysis and thematic clusters were used for more qualitative data.

Anticipating conclusions, evidence allows us to put forwards the following hypotheses of Milpa viability as a SRL, all of which can be further explained: 1) Milpa is not a universal livelihood for the Maya villages of FCP; it is, though, still majoritarian. 2) To do Milpa makes a lot more sense when a person has ejido rights. 3) There is more to this livelihood choice than farming outcomes. 4) Milpa's sustainability into the future would require revisiting the place of the young in the rural economy. Modest as they are, these findings have important policy implications; without taking them in consideration, poverty-alleviation oriented programmes for the Maya communities of FCP are likely to face more challenges than need be.