

Bogumiła Lisocka-Jaegermann, Maria Skoczek,
Joaquín Roberto González Martínez
Institute of Developing Countries
E-mail: bjlisock@uw.edu.pl

TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN LAS HUASTECAS REGION IN MEXICO. PRELIMINARY FIELD RESEARCH REPORT.

Abstract: The article contains preliminary report of field study conducted in February 2006 in Las Huastecas Region in Mexico by members of the Department of Regional Studies on Latin America at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of Warsaw University. The aim of the research was to determine changes in socio-economic patterns of Las Huastecas rural areas, as well as to grasp the way local inhabitants perceived them. Open and semi-structured interviews were held with local authorities and inhabitants, in many cases with the same persons that were interviewed during the previous research trip in 2001. Conclusions deal with such aspects of Las Huastecas reality, as further improvement in social and technical infrastructure, intensification of diversification of revenues including short and medium temporal migration to big cities in northern parts of Mexico as well as seasonal migration of rural labor to agribusiness sector. Some limited new initiatives related to small scale tourism, preservation of cultural heritage and aquaculture were also observed. The local inhabitants perceived their actual situation as more difficult than 5 years ago, but we have impression that many of social actors have been more active during this period.

Key words: local development, economic behavior of rural inhabitants, perception of changes, Las Huastecas, Mexico rural areas.

In February 2006 a team of three members of the Department of Regional Studies on Latin America at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of Warsaw University stayed for two weeks in Las Huastecas region in Mexico. The aim of the research conducted by Maria Skoczek, Joaquín Roberto González Martínez and Bogumiła Lisocka-Jaegermann was to determine changes in socio-economic patterns of Las Huastecas rural areas, as well as to grasp the way local inhabitants perceived them.

BACKGROUND

Las Huastecas region had already been studied by geographers from the same institution in 1985 and in 2001. As 2006 research has been partly

a follow-up study, a short review of previous experiences is necessary. In each case the scope of the research and its focus were different.

In the 1985 study entitled "Local rural structures of Las Huastecas region", basic features and social and economic problems of local rural communities as well as their external linkages were observed and analyzed. As geographers from the Autonomous University of State of Mexico took part in the field trip – the team was numerous and a relatively broad range of issues could be covered by the research. The main ones included:

1. Social and economic characteristics of rural, rural – urban as well as small and medium-sized urban settlements: their localization and spatial structure, social, cultural and functional features.
2. Social and economic patterns of agriculture, in particular land use and labor use patterns, typological differentiation of agriculture.
3. Social and cultural structures and their role in social communities; ethno-cultural features, social stratification, formal and informal relations.
4. Natural determinants of rural space organization and of agricultural activities.

The research conducted in July 1985 concentrated in three Las Huastecas regions (Fig. 1)

- Tamiahua-Naranjos-Cerro Azul (8 municipalities in the State of Veracruz)
- Huejutla de Reyes – Platón Sánchez – Tempoal de Sánchez (7 municipalities in the State of Veracruz and Hidalgo)
- Tamasopo – Ciudad Valles – Tamuín (3 municipalities in the State of San Luis Potosi).

43 localities were visited; 35 were analyzed for the sake of study of settlement patterns and 33 for the one of research concerning agriculture. Owners of private agricultural and agro industrial enterprises, indigenous communities' leaders and members, *ejido* members, local authorities, authorities of institutions, such as producers' unions, and public agricultural agencies were interviewed. Social, technical, production and services related infrastructure was observed and described in selected localities and towns. Several publications in English, Polish and in Spanish presented the research results (Czerny 1986; Czerny, Dembicz, Makowski, Skoczek 1987; Czerny, Makowski 1988; Dembicz, 1986; Dembicz, Dutkiewicz (eds.), 1985; *Patrones...*, 1987, Skoczek 1986).

In 2001, a smaller group of geographers from the Department of Regional Studies on Latin America joined by an economist from the Faculty of Urban and Regional Planning and three young Mexican scholars from the Faculty of Geography of the Autonomous University of State of Mexico worked on "Patterns of social and economic behaviour of inhabitants of rural areas of Las Huastecas region on the turn of XX century". The team was interested in the observation of transformations taking place in the region due to important changes in the national contexts, such as liberalization of economy

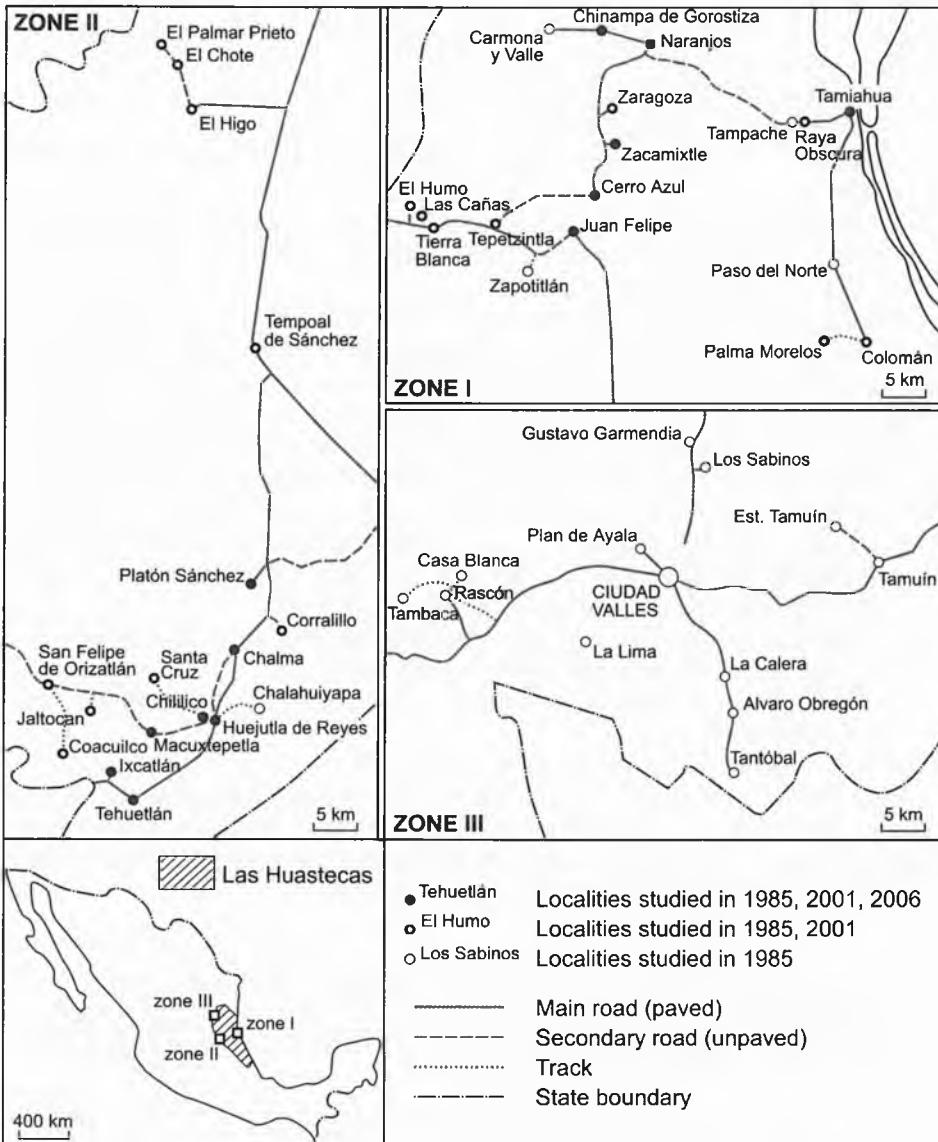


Fig. 1. Research areas in Las Huastecas Region, Mexico.

and the consequent privatization or disappearance of several agro-industrial enterprises, reform of the article 27 of Mexican Constitution leading to privatization of *ejidos* and rural communities, as well as changes related to global impacts and international events (such as the existence of NAFTA and new patterns of international trade). Interviews and observations aimed at the description of:

1. changes in agricultural production and in the system of agricultural products' commercialization;
2. patterns of labor migration movements among inhabitants of rural areas;
3. diversification of economic activities in rural localities (including development of traditional and new crafts as well as services, including the ones related to tourism).

The proposal of this research was presented by Bogumiła Lisocka-Jaegermann in the Tenth Meeting of the Researchers on Las Huastecas Region held in Tampico, Mexico in December 1998 (Lisocka-Jaegermann, Skoczek, 1999) and since the collaboration with the Las Huastecas team from Center of Research and Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Mexico has begun.

The field study held in July 2001 covered 28 localities that were selected on the basis of their social and economic features defined in 1985 (Fig. 1):

- Platón Sánchez, El Higo y Tempoal de Sánchez –due to the character of agricultural production: tobacco in Platón Sánchez, sugar cane in El Higo area and cattle in Tempoal de Sánchez;
- Huejutla de Reyes area as a region inhabited by Indian population living on traditional agriculture and crafts;
- Tamiahua – a fishing settlement with certain development of simple tourism services;
- Cerro Azul – a declining oil industry centre.

Functional structure of 22 localities was studied in order to capture changes that took place between 1985 and 2001. The results were published mainly in Spanish (Lisocka-Jaegermann, Skoczek 2002; Lisocka-Jaegermann 2003; Miętkiewska-Brynda 2002; Zarzycka 2002).

2006 RESEARCH PROJECT "TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOUR OF INHABITANTS OF RURAL AREAS IN LAS HUASTECAS REGION IN MEXICO AND ITS PERCEPTION"

As in 2001 we found out that local communities were undergoing deep transformation and in many discussions on future strategies and projects took place, we were interested in the observation of their results. The 2006 field trip was planned according to the following research aims:

1. An attempt of evaluation of programs of agricultural restructuring as well as public social welfare programs targeted at poor inhabitants of marginal rural areas, initiated in the end of the 90s.



Photo 1. Tamiahua – fishing oysters (Photograph: B.Lisocka-Jaegermann)



Photo 2. Cattle ranching in Las Huastecas (Photograph: B.Lisocka-Jaegermann)

2. Observation of perception of social and economic changes that took place in the period 2001-2005, among local authorities and rural inhabitants.
3. Verification of information on new development programs promoted by federal and state governments concerning development of tourism in rural areas and cultural heritage preservation on the local scale.

Research scope and techniques had to be limited in comparison to the two previous Las Huastecas studies. 13 localities (including 3 towns) were selected on the basis of 2001 research results. All of them had been visited by the team members previously. The team used public transport spending several days in each one of the three following towns and visiting nearby localities (Fig.1):

- Huejutla de Reyes (visits to Ixcatlán, Tehuetlán, Chililico, Macuxtepetla, Chalma and Platón Sánchez)
- Tamiahua (visits to different parts of the lagoon as well as to rural communities)
- Cerro Azul – Naranjos (visits to Zacamixtle, Chinampa de Gorostiza, Juan Felipe)

Open and semi-structures interview were held with local authorities and inhabitants. In many cases we managed to talk to the same persons that we had contacted in 2001. In others, people holding correspondent positions in local municipalities were interviewed. Observation and interview's results were discussed and confronted with data collected in 1985 and 2001.

Two meetings with Las Huastecas team of Mexican researchers from CIESAS took place in Mexico City in February, 2006 as well – one before the field trip, designed in order to discuss the field research project, and one after the filed trip. Preliminary results and their context were the main subject of the latter.

Preliminary conclusions deal with the following aspects of Las Huastecas reality:

1. Social and technical infrastructure.

There is no doubt that due to public investment a visible improvement on social infrastructure took place during the first 5 years of XXI century. New high and higher schools were created; access to schools is easier, among other factors thanks to *tebachillerato* schools situated in communities that hold classes on the basis of TV courses. University level schools exist in regional centers such as Huejutla de Reyes (5 institutions) and Cerro Azul (one). Scholarships for students coming from rural areas are available as well. New and better health service centers also are accessible. The teachers and young doctors live in rural communities.

Transport and communication services developed considerably. Cheap passenger transportation and more expensive taxis, as well as commodities transport service is available even if the quality and state of roads is far



Photo 3. Huehjutla de Reyes – traditional crafts on the local market (*tianguis*) (Photograph: B. Lisocka-Jaegermann)



Photo 4. Field interviews (Photograph: B.Lisocka-Jaegermann)

from satisfactory and differs considerably from the road system in the central and northern part of the country. There are more public international phone services including the cheap ones as well as internet cafes in bigger local centers. Internet has been installed in schools in some rural communities as well.

2. Economic and social changes, including new initiatives of diversification of local economy.

Cattle ranching is substituting agriculture and big scale-cattle ranching undergoes modernization (new cattle races, imported grass varieties) whereas smaller producers are steadily eliminated from the market.

Diversification of revenues seems to intensify and is present both in within poor and better off social strata (agricultural revenues are combined with all sorts of informal services, cattle ranching is often combined with formal services or in Tamiahua case with fishing)

The main federal social assistance program targeted at inhabitants of the poorest rural areas (*Oportunidades*) that was designed as continuation of the one existing in 2001 (*Progresá*) provides an important source of cash revenue to rural families.

We could observe failure of several local initiatives of agricultural production diversification: the so called 'alternative crops' have not fulfilled expectations (in Platón Sánchez), a local women chicken cooperative failed (in Juan Felipe), a grass-root NGO disappeared (Huejutla de Reyes), fishing can not regain its past importance (Tamiahua) ; Programs of technical and financial assistance to agriculture seem to be limited to declarations. They are not accessible to most communities. Orange groves seemed to be recovering their importance in comparison to the situation observed in 2001.

We could also observe that some relatively prosperous communities rely on their own strategies adapting them to changing circumstances. Petty trade works as such a strategy in Chinampa de Gorostiza and its patterns transform constantly – recently local traders begun to cater to migrants living in the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros.

Migration to the northern states maintains its importance within local survival strategies and consists in:

- short and medium temporal migration to the big cities as Monterrey ("traditional" destination for people working in domestic services and in construction sector), Reynosa and Laredo (the so called "border cities" with abundant supply of jobs in the *maquila* industry);
- seasonal migration of rural labor to agribusiness sector in the State of Sinaloa on the Pacific coast.

Young males that graduated from high schools existing in rural communities (*telebachillerato*) usually choose one of the two forms of migration mentioned above.

Migration to the United States maintains the similar level and character as in the previous years and is organized on individual and family network basis. Local authorities begin to perceive some negative consequences of migration as family disintegration, alcoholism, drugs and AIDS

In several places expectations are now laid in the development of small scale tourism, mainly targeted at nationals and based on either natural (beach, rivers, landscape, vegetation) or cultural resources. In the first case some interesting private initiatives were detected, such as organization of snorkeling and diving trips to one of the coral reef island situated close to Tamiahua, as well as big scale public initiatives (the construction of bridge across Tamiahua lagoon in order to connect the town and the beach. In the case of ideas related to cultural tourism programs aiming at preservation of cultural heritage are formulated both by authorities (municipalities of Chinampa de Gorostiza, Cerro Azul, Huejutla de Reyes) and to smaller extend by private actors. Huejutla's Foro Ixmati – operating as an folk and local arts gallery, modern and traditional crafts workshop, cultural and educational center is a good example. Its enthusiastic owner is interested in revalorization of local crafts and in the creation of cultural tourism in the town – however it seems that public support is desperately needed in order to sustain Foro's activities.

3. Socio-political transformations.

In the interviews with both local authorities and inhabitants more active attitudes towards political participation could be observed as in 2001. Negative assessment of state policy such as open critique of corruption and clientelism, of wrong design of social welfare program as well as interest in deeper political changes on the local level were expressed by many social actors. More diverse political patterns exists among local authorities. In some cases new political actors took over municipalities – in Huejutla de Reyes there was an unexpected change related to irregularities committed by local government and PRD party was governing in the place for the first time. In some other municipalities interests in consistent local policy and continuation rather than change was presented as an asset. New initiatives of local authorities such as frequent visits to distant communities as well public consultations were observed. Electoral conflicts and political processes taking place in the country (presidential elector campaign was in progress in Mexico during our visit) however their understanding in Las Huastecas context requires further studies due to specific regional and local dynamics.

Las Huastecas region seems to maintain its peripheral character detected in both of the previous studies. Disillusion with the prospects of changes existing in 2001 was detected in several cases as well as critical perception of existing opportunities. More active attitudes of social actors can be seen as a premise for the region's future transformation.

Las Huastecas field trips repeated 3 times over the last 20 years create a valuable perspective for analyzing the region's dynamics. They give a unique insight into the nature of processes taking place in rural Mexico.

REFERENCES

- Czerny M., 1986, Estructuras rurales de Las Huastecas. Resultados preliminares de las investigaciones conjuntas polaco-mexicanas. Actividades economicas en los centros poblacionales, *Miscellanea Geographica*, 305-311.
- Czerny M., Dembicz A., Makowski J., Skoczek M., 1988, Rural improvements between 1975 and 1985 in Las Huastecas Region, Mexico, in: J. Hinderink, E. Szulc-Dąbrowiecka (eds.), *Successful Rural Development in Third World Countries, Nederlandse Geografische Studies* 67, 155-165. Amsterdam/Utrecht.
- Czerny M., Makowski J., 1988, Small city and its Region: Huejutla de Reyes, *Miscellanea Geographica*, 303-311.
- Dembicz A., 1986, Estructuras rurales de Las Huastecas. Resultados preliminares de las investigaciones conjuntas polaco-mexicanas. Investigaciones de campo en Las Huastecas: antecedentes, temática y la ejecución del estudio, *Miscellanea Geographica*, 297-303.
- Dembicz A., Dutkiewicz P.(eds.), 1987, *Lokalne problemy wsi regionu Las Huastecas w Meksyk* [Local problems in Mexican las Huastecas region's countryside], series: Polska lokalna i samorząd terytorialny w warunkach reformy i rekonstrukcji gospodarki przestrzennej, WGSR, Warszawa.
- Lisocka-Jaegermann B., Skoczek M., 1999, Patrones de comportamientos socioeconómicos de la población rural en Las Huastecas a fines del siglo XX. Propuesta del proyecto de investigación, *Actas Latinoamericanas de Varsovia*, tomo 22, 91-100.
- Lisocka-Jaegermann B., Skoczek M., (eds.), 2002, Patrones de comportamientos socioeconómicos en las áreas rurales de Las Huastecas a caballo de los siglos XX y XXI, *Actas Latinoamericanas de Varsovia*, tomo 25, p. 191.
- Lisocka-Jaegermann B., 2002 Cambios de Comportamientos Socioeconómicos de la Población Rural de La Huasteca, *Miscellanea Geographica* 10, 213-224.
- Lisocka-Jaegermann B., 2003 Transformaciones agrarias en México, *Actas Latinoamericanas de Varsovia*, tomo 26, 33 – 43.
- Miętkiewska-Brynda J., 2002, Movilidad espacial de la población rural de Las Huastecas, *Miscellanea Geographica* 10, 225-231.
- Patrones de estructuras rurales de Las Huastecas*, 1987, *Actas Latinoamericanas de Varsovia*, tomo 3, 256Warszawa.
- Skoczek M., 1986, Estructuras rurales de Las Huastecas. Resultados preliminares de las investigaciones conjuntas polaco-mexicanas. Composición de fuerza de trabajo rural en relación con sistemas de tenencia de la tierra y orientación de la producción agropecuaria, *Miscellanea Geographica*, 313-319.
- Zarzycka A., 2002, Estructura funcional de los centros urbanos de la Región de Las Huastecas en México, *Miscellanea Geographica* 10, 233-240.

English translation: Bogumita Lisocka-Jaegermann