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Mexico

Thanks to the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I traveled to southern Mexico to conduct introductory fieldwork. My research focuses on the politics of genetically modified (GM) crops in Latin America, particularly the use of international law as a tool for marginalized actors to shape state regulatory policies. In previous work, I had interviewed civil society leaders in urban centers – Lima, Peru and Mexico City, Mexico – to understand their approach toward treaty-based activism. However, I had not had the opportunity to engage in research in rural areas.

The SKJ grant allowed me to do precisely this. I focused on two objectives: (1) interviewing civil society leaders about regional activism and policies surrounding genetically modified crops, and (2) speaking with farmers to understand how they think about GM crops and related farming practices. My field sites included San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas), Oaxaca City (Oaxaca), and Mérida (Yucatán). I chose these sites because they are highly agricultural states, containing relatively large indigenous populations and strong traditions of smallholder farming. During my research, I also took a quick detour to conduct interviews in Antigua (Guatemala), as a means of assessing similar policymaking challenges within a very different political context.

I found interviews with civil society members to be immensely valuable in shaping my understanding of the Mexican political context at the state level. My central interest was to uncover how regional efforts relate to national efforts. Do regional groups consider international law a viable tool to advance their interests? Do they work alongside, and in coordination with, nationwide campaigns? What is the character of policy goals at the state-level?

The interviews that I conducted with civil society groups provided me with mixed answers. On one hand, international treaties were viewed as helpful. In Yucatán, for example, civil society groups were able to invoke ILO Convention 169 to force the Mexican government to suspend the production of genetically modified soy, and to initiate a process for the consultation of indigenous communities prior to the introduction of GM crops. This is seen as a major victory. However, at the same time, many civil society leaders expressed displeasure with the rights-based approach to advocacy, claiming that vagueness in treaty language made it difficult to use for their purposes. Resources clearly played a major role as well; many of the organizations expressed interest in this type of work, but thought that it was better handled by larger organizations in Mexico City.

It also became very apparent in my interviews that genetically modified crops are not viewed as an isolated issue. What I mean by this is that, at least within the areas I visited, GM crops are linked within a much larger bundle of rural grievances in the domain of agriculture: removal of price supports for basic crops, privatization of community land, unfair market competition, and corruption of public authorities. This means that GM crops, as an isolated issue, tends to be relatively powerless; people have more pressing issues to deal with. Therefore, civil society groups link them with other issues related to community empowerment. Since the current political climate makes legislative change difficult at both the state and national level, many organizations instead choose to focus on activities related to strengthening traditional farming practices, for example, through the promotion of agroecology. Or, rather than attempt to pass state-level legislation to ban GMOs, they might focus on

legislative initiatives to strengthen community rights to biological resources, such as Oaxaca's 2017 law to protect "collective biocultural patrimony."

I also spoke with farmers at all of my research sites to better understand their attitudes toward GM crops. This was my favorite component of the research, because it was very new to me – while I had some idea of what to expect from civil society groups, I knew very little of what to expect from farmers. In very general terms, I spoke with two types of farmers: (1) those that produce to sell to market, and (2) those that produce for subsistence/family consumption. The farmers that produce for markets tended to have minimal hesitation about GM crops; most already use purchased hybrid seeds in combination with fertilizers and pesticides. However, none of those that I spoke with were demanding GM seeds. Instead, they just wanted the seeds that would produce the highest yield. Many lamented the loss of their traditional crops, and often continue to use native seeds on the side, for their own consumption. Subsistence farmers had much stronger views about GM crops, and were not willing to consider their use.

Overall, this experience was immensely beneficial. Most of all, it pushed me to begin thinking beyond international treaties, and to understand the larger set of strategies that are being implemented to confront the introduction of GM crops. This has helped to shift my research question away from a somewhat narrow focus on treaty effectiveness to a broader focus on the ways in which GM crop regulatory policy is developed. Second, it provided me with a better understanding of local context and the importance of thinking about GM crops as a single issue embedded within and linked with many others. Third, it allowed me to develop a set of contacts in the region that will be able to help me in my future research. It was no small feat to get these interviews and develop these relationships, and I am certain that they will help me as my project progresses.

This was a tremendous opportunity to advance my research, and I would like to thank the Jenson family and anyone else involved with supporting this grant.