



AMERICAN
JEWISH
WORLD
SERVICE

A woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a bright yellow blouse with intricate, colorful floral embroidery in shades of red, purple, blue, and green. The blouse has a black lace-like trim around the neckline and armholes. She is standing outdoors in a wooded area with trees in the background.

**PROMOTING
HUMAN RIGHTS IN
MEXICO**

OUR MISSION

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to fight poverty and pursue justice in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. We respond to critical issues of our time—from disasters, authoritarianism and hunger, to the persecution of women and minorities worldwide. To make a lasting impact, we fund more than 500 social change organizations, accompany them with coaching, skill-building and resources, and bring them together to scale up their work and strengthen social movements. Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill and internationally, we advocate for laws and policies that bolster these efforts worldwide. With Jewish values and a global reach, AJWS is making a difference in millions of lives and bringing a more just and equitable world closer for all.

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

AJWS has been supporting human rights efforts in Mexico for 25 years. We currently support over 25 grantee-partners working on two critical human rights issues: promoting civil and political rights, and defending land, water and climate justice. As Mexico's grassroots activists mobilize to make their country a more just and equitable society, AJWS provides funding and support to strengthen their movements.

COVER Maria de los Ángeles, pictured here at a grantee convening organized by AJWS in 2024, is the treasurer of the board of *Coordinadora de Pueblos Unidos por el Cuidado y la Defensa del Agua (COPUDA)*. A collective made up of 17 Indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca, COPUDA fights to protect the communities' right to access and manage their own water. Photo by Citlali Fabián

THIS PAGE In the Sierra Juárez mountain range of Oaxaca, AJWS grantee-partner *Unión de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juárez de Oaxaca (UNOSJO)* works with Indigenous Zapotec communities to defend their lands, culture and rights. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik

AJWS GRANTEES IN MEXICO

Asamblea de Mujeres Indígenas de Oaxaca
 Asoc. de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos y Víctimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos
 Centro de Colaboración Cívica
 Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan
 Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas
 Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios, A.C. + FUUNDEC
 Colectivo Búsqueda de Familiares Regresando a Casa Morelos
 Coordinadora de Pueblos Unidos por la Defensa del Agua
 Familiares en Búsqueda María Herrera
 Familias Unidas en la Búsqueda y Localización de Personas Desaparecidas A.C.
 Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en Nuevo León
 Grupo VI.D.A Laguna A.C.

La Alianza por la Libre Determinación y la Autonomía
 La Vía Campesina México
 Mecanismo de Acceso a la Verdad y el Esclarecimiento Histórico
 Milynali Red
 Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México
 Otros Mundos
 Promoción Humana, Consultoría SAS
 Red de Mujeres Mixe
 Sabuesos Guerreras
 Servicios del Pueblo Mixe
 Servicios para una Educación Alternativa
 Servicios y Asesoría para la Paz
 Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo
 Unión de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca
 Voces Mesoamericanas + Colectivo Junax Ko´ tanyik
 Yo SoY Semilla Clown



*While our partners are based in the states indicated above, AJWS also funds three networks that have member organizations operating in other states around the country.



Background

WHY WE SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

Mexico is home to vibrant and diverse cultures, has abundant biodiversity and is one of the largest economies on the planet—and yet, over 36% of the population lives in poverty. There is a starkly uneven distribution of wealth and public funds, worsened by pervasive corruption and the government’s reluctance to respect the rights and autonomy of Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups. This reality has been aggravated by the government forsaking basic responsibilities to its poorest citizens. Moreover, since Mexico’s so-called “War on Drugs” was launched in 2006, the country has been plagued by violence at the hands of armed cartels and the authorities—leading to an alarming number of deaths and disappearances. In the face of these grave challenges, strong, innovative social movements are working to pave the way for a better future—one in which the government is held accountable for honoring and protecting the rights of all its citizens. AJWS is by their side, investing in their visions and actions for a more equitable and just society.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIZATION

Many of the issues facing Mexico today trace their roots to the history of colonization. For millennia, advanced Indigenous societies like the Maya, Zapotec and Aztec lived off the land, using their own sophisticated systems of agriculture, mathematics,

architecture, astronomy, language and theology. But starting in the 1500s, Spanish colonists invaded the region and massacred, displaced and exploited millions of Indigenous Peoples. The colonizers—known as “conquistadors”—imposed a regime of forced labor, declared Roman Catholicism the sole permissible religion and professed Spanish the official language.

Spanish rule came to an end in 1821, when Mexico ousted the Spanish Empire and won independence. Over the next two centuries, land stayed in the hands of elites in a country that continued to be largely rural. When Porfirio Díaz seized control of the country in 1876, he ushered in a 30-year era of dictatorial rule. He rewarded supporters with bribes, public office and land, and punished opponents with assassination or exile.

20TH CENTURY REVOLUTION

The Mexican Revolution (from 1910 to 1920) led to the ousting of Díaz. This revolution, considered the first major political, social and cultural revolution of the 20th century, birthed the 1917 Constitution—one of the most advanced for its time in terms of social rights. The Constitution laid out the recognition and demarcation of communal territories for Indigenous Peoples and *campesino* (peasant) lands—a major promise for Indigenous Peoples, for whom common property is vital.

ABOVE The Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Oaxaca’s city center dates back to 1551, when it was commissioned by Spanish colonists. Over hundreds of years, the Catholic Church conducted violent campaigns of evangelization, pillaged gold and other resources and enslaved Indigenous Peoples to serve as laborers. Photo courtesy of AJWS

While the Constitution sought to right many wrongs borne of post-colonial rule, Mexico's elite continued to control resources and power, resulting in a new form of dictatorship. In 1929, President Plutarco Elías Calles established the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party—known as the PRI). The PRI ruled harshly for the next 72 years, using intimidation, propaganda, military force and the co-option of workers' union leaders and social organizations, among other repressive tactics. As organized guerrillas, unions and student movements started to emerge in the 1960s, government leaders began to order the detention, torture and even murder of citizens—a coordinated effort to repress opposing political parties and rebellions against the political regime. In 2000, the PRI was finally voted out of power, and since then presidential transitions have continued to take place. Still, deep-seated problems persist.

THE 'WAR ON DRUGS': A HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS

In recent decades, Mexican society has faced a staggering level of violence. Since 2006, when the government declared a so-called “War on Drugs” with U.S. support, Mexico has been consumed in a wave of terror—a product of the expansion of drug cartels and organized crime, corrupt and abusive officials and widespread militarization. This conflict has resulted in a catastrophic human rights disaster. Violent

homicides, femicides, kidnappings, human trafficking and disappearances have become commonplace, with a staggering number of victims. According to official figures, over 114,000 people have been registered as “disappeared”—abducted and often murdered—since 1962, and more than 300,000 have lost their lives. Adding to an already complex situation is a forensic crisis: Currently, the government holds more than 52,000 unidentified human remains in its custody.

With the government failing to bring justice, since 2015, family members of disappeared people have joined together to locate their loved ones, fight impunity, obtain justice and prevent future disappearances themselves. Over the last decade, these groups of families—known as *colectivos* (collectives)—have emerged as strong actors of social change in Mexico, particularly in the states most impacted by the crisis.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES'S RIGHTS

Indigenous Peoples also face other kinds of violence, including dispossession from their lands, the imposition of the massive infrastructure and energy projects on their lands without their consent, a lack of legal representation in their native languages and unequal access to health, education and basic services. In principle, nearly 40% of Mexico's land belongs to Indigenous and peasant communities, who have a



On International Day of Victims of Forced Disappearances, hundreds of bereaved mothers and activists marched in Mexico City. Carrying a petition bearing 100,000 signatures, they called on the government to search for the bodies of their loved ones who have been disappeared as a result of the “War on Drugs.” Photo by Regina López

communal system of independent self-governance to manage their own natural resources and resolve local issues—yet the government’s economic policies and programs often disregard these rights.

Self-determination and collective land ownership—foundational rights that preserve the way of life of Indigenous Peoples—were once protected by the Constitution. But in recent decades, reforms have stripped away these protections. Since the 1990s, the government has given concessions on the majority of the country’s land to private companies and individuals who are, in turn, building industrial farms, propping up energy and mining sectors and undertaking other massive infrastructure projects. These land concessions are often made in the name of economic development and modernization, but governments and developers alike fail to consult with and consider the people who depend on those lands and waterways.

Oil, mineral mines and wind energy projects are largely located on or near Indigenous lands, posing additional challenges to Indigenous communities striving to forge their own vision for the future. Many Indigenous communities are working collectively to protect their

territories by updating their communal bylaws so they prohibit mining and other extractive projects on their land. And though some communities have sued developers and won, the vast majority face long legal battles to have their rights respected.

THE DANGERS OF DISSENT

Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental activists and human rights defenders. Developers, organized crime organizations and government entities that stand to profit from land concessions have used vicious tactics to deter dissent, sometimes acting in complicity with each other. Indigenous and environmental leaders have been harassed, arrested and even murdered. In addition, the growing presence of organized crime, in collusion with local government officials and the police, have increased violent attacks against local protectors of land and water.

Members of *colectivos* searching for their disappeared loved ones are suffering this violence as well. Many have been targeted while conducting their searches, as they must enter into territories controlled by cartels or organized crime, and some have even been killed.



ABOVE Members of AJWS grantee *Coordinadora de Pueblos Unidos por el Cuidado y la Defensa del Agua (COPUDA)*, a collective of 17 Indigenous communities that joined forces to defend their access to water, plant trees to celebrate World Water Day. Photo by Paulina Vega-Gonzalez

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: MEXICO



Mexico has the **11th** largest economy in the world.¹

36.3%

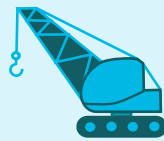
In Mexico, **36.3%** of the population lives below the poverty line.²

300,000

As a result of the "War on Drugs", over **300,000** people have been killed, and **114,000** people have been officially declared "disappeared" or missing.³



Impunity is a persistent problem: Mexican authorities resolve just over **1%** of crimes.⁴



60% of Mexico's land has been distributed to private companies and individuals for massive development projects.⁵

70

There are over **70** Indigenous groups in Mexico, and **19%** of the population—or **23.2** million people—identify as Indigenous.⁵

31

In 2022, **31** Indigenous and environmental activists were killed in connection to their work.⁶



Mexico is a mega-biodiverse country—one of **12** nations hosting almost **70%** of the world's species of animals and plants.

¹ International Monetary Fund, 2024.

² Coneval, Mexico's Poverty Analysis Agency. The last census was published in 2023, with figures updated through 2022.

³ Mexico's National Registry of Disappeared Persons, updated to December 2023.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2023

⁵ Government of Mexico, updated figures to 2022.

⁶ 2022 Global Witness Report.



AJWS grantees take a stand

Despite these daunting challenges, Mexican activists and movement builders remain steadfast in their commitment to building a more just society, especially for and with the most marginalized communities. AJWS is standing with these changemakers by supporting organizations working in two key areas: achieving truth and justice for the disappeared and defending Indigenous lands and rights.

TRUTH AND JUSTICE FOR THE DISAPPEARED

In the wake of the ongoing crisis of disappearances and an absence of government accountability, family search groups known as *colectivos* have exemplified the meaning of a grassroots movement. Coming together around the shared agenda of finding their loved ones and achieving truth and justice, they have stepped in where the local and federal governments have abdicated responsibility. They comb the land for mass graves and partner with forensics teams to identify remains, and they search at hospitals, prisons, detention centers and morgues. They have also fought for and won significant legislative and administrative victories, and they're ensuring that the federal government positions the issue of disappearances as one of its top priorities. Moreover, they embody a steadfast commitment to participatory decision-making, insisting that any process to determine solutions to the crisis of disappearances be carried out in consultation with the families.

As a result of the *colectivos'* effective advocacy, the government of President López Obrador was the first administration to publicly acknowledge the scope and dimension of the crisis, and the family collectives

were regularly welcomed into official decision-making spaces that are victim-informed and victim-centered. These important shifts in the government's response and engagement set a precedent for other aggrieved communities to advocate for inclusion in the policy decisions that affect their lives, exercise new ways of democratic practices and push for participatory processes with decision-makers.

To maximize the impact of this formidable movement, AJWS provides financial and accompaniment support to the ecosystem at three different levels: **individual** *colectivos* of families, **national networks** that organize and coordinate among *colectivos*, and **human rights organizations** that provide legal, organizational and strategic support to the *colectivos*.

Our tried and tested methodology of investing in grassroots and marginalized groups, supporting movement-building and operating in neglected areas has earned us trust among this movement, and it has also enabled us to guide other funders who want to better understand the landscape.

AJWS GRANTEES EFFECTING CHANGE

In 2011, Leticia Hidalgo's life took a tragic turn when her son Roy was abducted from their home in Nuevo León by men wearing municipal police uniforms. After Roy disappeared, Letty met many

ABOVE AJWS grantee *Regresando a Casa Morelos*, a collective of families searching for their disappeared loved ones, partnered with the *Brigada Nacional de Búsqueda* (the National Search Brigade) to bring together collectives from across the country and conduct a two-week long mass search. Photo courtesy of *Regresando a Casa Morelos*

families whose loved ones had also been taken—and she decided to start a collective to search and advocate together. That is how **Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en Nuevo León (FUNDENL)**, or Forces United for Our Disappeared of Nuevo León, was born. FUNDENL has adopted innovative techniques in their searches, using drones and geographic referencing maps to locate human remains, and operating an online database to share findings. Working with forensic anthropologists, archeologists and local police, FUNDENL has found over 100,000 skeletal remains, and they've helped countless families find closure through identifying their loved ones and “returning them home.”



Donning special suits to avoid contaminating the scene, family members of FUNDENL participate in the inspection of a suspected clandestine grave with forensic experts. Photo courtesy of FUNDENL

In 2015, 35 family collectives joined forces to create the **Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México (MNDM)**, or the Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico. This network—which has since grown to include 80 family collectives from 22 Mexican states and three Central American countries—participated in the drafting of laws and policies that demand documentation of disappearances, establish penalties for perpetrators, and create mechanisms for searches, investigations and effective cooperation from authorities. Through their consistent advocacy, MNDM is ensuring that the issue of the disappeared stays high on local and national government agendas and that the effective participation of affected families remains common practice.

MNDM gains additional power for its advocacy through the support of civil society organizations with expertise in related fields. One of these is **Servicios y Asesoría para la Paz (SERAPAZ)**,

or Services and Counsel for Peace, which is an established peace-building and conflict resolution organization in Mexico. SERAPAZ helps *colectivos* that are part of MNDM coordinate and strategize together, advocate for laws to bring justice and accountability and ensure that MNDM has a seat at the table in national commissions. In addition, SERAPAZ facilitates conversations with communities affected by violence, teaching them to mediate conflict.

DEFENDING INDIGENOUS LANDS AND RIGHTS

Communal land ownership in Mexico is shrinking. In the late 20th century, the government pushed privatization in order to increase investments in the country and make land management more efficient, embracing policies and practices that compelled some communal landowners to sell their lands. More recently, government administrations have given mining, oil and wind farm concessions to foreign firms, with these proposed projects being carried out on or near Indigenous lands. Successive Mexican governments—including the current left-of-center administration—have not only endorsed these practices, they've catalyzed them. For example, in the name of job creation, President López Obrador launched new megaprojects—including an intercity railway called the Mayan Train, an oil refinery and an industrial corridor with various infrastructure projects that link ports in the Pacific Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico. The majority of these projects are located in the southern part of the country, where the highest concentration of Indigenous Peoples lives.

To support Indigenous Peoples in exercising their rights and defending their territories, AJWS provides funding to local organizations, mostly headed by and for Indigenous Peoples. These organizations work to preserve Indigenous self-determination through legal defense, communal management of their waterways, forests and soils, and preservation of their languages and cultural practices, including farming native foods.

The states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, where many of AJWS's partners are based, have constitutions with the most pro-Indigenous legal frameworks in the country. These constitutions explicitly recognize “*usos y costumbres*”—traditional collective governance structures that include the right of Indigenous people to carry out their own decision-making processes, hold local elections without political parties, and to have their own justice systems on all matters pertaining to their legally recognized territories.

As a flexible funder, AJWS recognizes that Indigenous organizations and resistance movements have existed for centuries—and that strategic allies are necessary to connect local struggles to international arenas. AJWS provides resources to organizations small and large, grassroots groups and well-connected networks. This tiered approach maximizes their capacity to make change at all levels of the struggle—communal, regional, state and national.

AJWS GRANTEES EFFECTING CHANGE

A longtime AJWS grantee, **SER Mixe** mobilizes members of the Mixe Indigenous community to advocate for the practices of self-determination that protect their way of life. SER Mixe has a strong legal team that provides technical services to Indigenous communities, and at the same time, they advocate for legal changes that will improve the ability of Indigenous groups to exercise their rights and defend their lands against projects imposed on them by the government or corporations. In addition, SER

Mixe works on language and cultural revitalization, women's health, social and political rights, and culturally appropriate education through the creation of a Mixe university.

To bring about change on a national scale, the **Alliance for Self-Determination and Autonomy (ALDEA)** was founded to support communities and organizations in their fight for the full recognition of the right to self-determination in the Constitution. Through joint organizing and advocacy, they're currently working to ensure the passage of a congressional bill that would transform the legal framework and guarantee the Mexican State respects and protects Indigenous rights. ALDEA's proposed amendment captures the historical demands of Indigenous Peoples and seeks to give these communities the legal autonomy to fully exercise their right to the self-determination. Currently, a bill presented by President López Obrador, incorporating most of the ALDEA's proposals, is in Congress pending discussion.



Young members of SER Mixe participate in a training on sustainable agriculture and soil conservation. Photo courtesy of SER Mixe



In February 2024, AJWS organized a convening of grantees working on the defense of Indigenous land and water in Mexico. For three days, our partners collaborated, learned from one another, and shared challenges and successes in their efforts to include women and youth in their decision-making assemblies. Photo by Citlali Fabián

OUR COMMITMENT IN MEXICO

AJWS is committed to helping Mexico's people advocate for their civil and political rights and protect the lands and rights that many communities depend on for survival. Our grantees are:



Tackling the crisis of forced disappearances by conducting searches and helping to identify remains.



Advocating for increased government accountability and action, and demanding that the government engage in more participatory and democratic practices.



Urging that the government center and consult the families of victims in its decision-making on policies that address disappearances.



Drawing the attention of the international community to the complex problem of missing persons.



Increasing the leadership and civil and political participation of Indigenous youth and women.



Keeping alive self-determination practices in Indigenous communities and strengthening communal governance structures.



Advocating for legal protections for Indigenous lands and rights.



Ensuring that Indigenous Peoples have a voice in making decisions about projects that affect their lands, rights and way of life.



Strengthening grassroots organizations and fostering collaboration among likeminded groups to increase their collective power to promote human rights.

18.2 MILLION

AJWS's investment in Mexico since 1989





Grantee-partners participate in a reflection session at the "Defensa del Territorio" ("Defense of Our Territory") gathering convened by AJWS in February 2024. Photo by Citlali Fabián

AJWS GRANTEES IN MEXICO: A Closer Look

María's shirt bears the images of her four sons—Jesús Salvador, Raúl, Luis Armando and Gustavo—whose disappearance prompted her to ignite a movement. Photo by Christine Han



FAMILIARES EN BUSQUEDA MARIA HERRERA

Transformed by grief, a mother searches for Mexico's disappeared.

María Herrera did not expect to be quoted in international newspapers, meet with the Pope or see her name on *TIME* magazine's 2023 list of the World's 100 Most Influential People. Fifteen years ago, she was busy caring for her family and running a jewelry and clothing business. But her life changed forever when two of her sons never returned from a work trip in 2008. Jesús Salvador and Raúl disappeared first, and Gustavo and Luís Armando disappeared two years later.

Over a decade later, María still cries when she speaks of her four missing sons. Her pain is written on her face. She describes it as “the worst and most painful thing you can imagine...losing a family member destroys the entire family.”

DISSAPPEARANCES LURK IN THE SHADOWS

María didn't know about the issue of disappearances in Mexico until it happened to her. Her sons are four of an estimated 114,000 people who have been officially recognized as “disappeared” in Mexico. Since 2006, when the so-called “War on Drugs” started, violence in Mexico has spiraled. The crisis has affected nearly every part of society—but it's been especially brutal for marginalized and low-income families. This violence is a product of a complex combination of expanding drug cartels, organized crime and corrupt officials. “It is not just organized crime,” shared María. “It is institutionalized crime.”

In this environment of violence and lawlessness, María faced retribution and threats for going to the police and speaking out publicly about her sons' disappearances. One of her children was mugged and threatened. Eventually, she moved to a different area for her family's safety.

SEARCHING FOR FAMILIES' MISSING “TREASURES”

With the police and local government proving a dangerous dead end, María started searching for her sons herself. The local district attorney discouraged her, saying that anthropological experts were needed to find forensic evidence without accidentally destroying it. So, she went to local universities and sought people with this expertise. Though her

first organized search was small, they successfully located human remains of disappeared persons. The searchers refer to them as “treasures”—because locating a body enables families to have a burial and reach some closure.

At first, María had no resources or support for these searches. She needed transportation for volunteers to search in remote places—and funds for hours of training to teach volunteers what to look for and how to carefully handle human remains so that they can be tested for DNA matches. That's where AJWS stepped in—we were María's organization's first funder, and we continue to be the main source of support for her ongoing quest for truth and justice. AJWS's staff also helps with networking and support with applying for funding from other grantmakers.

BRINGING TOGETHER “FAMILIES IN SEARCH”

As María's searches expanded and she raised more funds, she founded the collective **Familiares en Búsqueda** (“Families in Search”). Today, María's organization coordinates Red de Enlaces Nacionales—a network of nearly 200 collectives representing over 2,000 bereaved families in the country. Beyond organizing searches, including an annual nationwide search brigade, she is working to create a future for Mexico where disappearances, violence and lawlessness are things of the past.

María has met with the Pope to elevate disappearances as a moral issue. She's participated in the crafting of a more adequate legal framework to deal with disappearances. She's filed a lawsuit against the Mexican government and participated in the complaint the Mexican government filed against arm manufactures. She is fighting a battle for peace and security at all levels.

María describes her goal of finding her sons as “what is left for me to be able to die in peace.” But she wants to pass on the torch, too. “I'm 74 now. My hands are no good to take a pitchfork or shovel to the ground. That work is for the young people now. I tell them, ‘we need you.’”

LOCATION: Mexico City **AJWS FUNDING HISTORY:** \$175,358 since 2017 **YEAR FOUNDED:** 2012

UNIÓN DE ORGANIZACIONES DE LA SIERRA JUÁREZ, OAXACA (UNOSJO)

Indigenous communities assert their rights and maintain their ancestral land stewardship practices to shape their own futures.



Verónica Martínez Cruz tends to the corn plants near her home, which she grows for subsistence. AJWS grantee UNOSJO is supporting Indigenous communities like Verónica's to defend their rights to steward their lands and determine their own futures. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik

The state of Oaxaca is home to some of the largest forest areas in Mexico. For generations, Indigenous communities have relied on and managed this land for multiple uses, including conservation and agriculture. Many families grow corn, beans and chilies for subsistence, living off the land and stewarding it sustainably.

But despite being organized and successful managers of their lands, these communities have faced threats for decades. First, timber companies exploited their forests, backed by government concessions that enabled and encouraged the plundering of these territories. Starting in the 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) brought in cheap imports of crops that local farmers could not compete with, forcing many to migrate to urban areas and the United States for work.

In the last 25 years, government programs have promoted the use of genetically modified seeds as a way to support agricultural production. Genetically modified (GMO) crops can have negative impacts on ecosystems, including reducing the number of insects that serve as food for wildlife and curbing the diversity of other plant types, making the ecosystem more vulnerable. This is particularly concerning because Mexico is considered a mega-biodiverse country—one of 12 nations hosting almost 70% of the world's species of animals and plants, including 40 endemic types of corn and 120 types of chilies.

That's why **Unión de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca (UNOSJO)**—or Union of Organizations of Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca, an Indigenous Zapotec NGO focused on promoting traditional food systems as a means of Indigenous Peoples' self-determination—is working to change this reality.

DEFENDING NATIVE CORN FROM GMO CONTAMINATION

Corn, or maize, is a vital crop for Mexico's Indigenous Peoples with great cultural and spiritual significance. Some of the earliest evidence of corn is found in present-day Zapotec lands. UNOSJO, one of the leading Indigenous organizations in Latin America working on food sovereignty, is defending native corn varieties against GMO crops. They were instrumental in exposing how GMOs were contaminating the native corn planted by Indigenous subsistence farmers, and they have partnered with scientists to evaluate the impacts and extent of GMO contamination.

UNOSJO also facilitates the national Network in Defense of Native Corn, which spans 22 Mexican states, and in partnership with other Indigenous and community organizations, they've launched a national movement for farmers' rights in defense of the native corn both in Oaxaca and nationally. Currently, UNOSJO participates in the NAFTA Panel, where a ban on the use of GMO crops enacted by President López Obrador is being questioned by the American and Canadian governments on health-related grounds.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE AND INVESTING IN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

In addition to their documentation and advocacy work, UNOSJO is investing in the next generation. They have partnered with a union of rural schoolteachers in Oaxaca, developing curricula for elementary schools to grow edible schoolyard gardens and use the plots as tools for teaching various subjects. Through these schoolyard gardens, Zapotec children are learning to grow and harvest an assortment of vegetables and make collective decisions about what and how to sow. The children are also learning how to compost food waste, which is then used to nourish their gardens without using toxic fertilizers that poison the soil.

This venture is also helping combat the wave of processed foods that have flooded village stores, causing a spike in childhood obesity and a decrease in the consumption of traditional foods, like maize, beans, and squash. With guidance from UNOSJO, teachers are helping reverse this trend, and they're weaving Zapotec cultural practices into the curriculum, underscoring the connections between culture, land and food.

Moreover, in collaboration with another AJWS grantee, **La Via Campesina Mexico**, UNOSJO is working to launch a program for teaching new generations how to employ agroecological practices. UNOSJO's efforts not only contribute to Indigenous communities' potential to achieve food sovereignty, but they also help communities preserve their cultural practices, Zapotec identity and territories.

LOCATION: Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca

YEAR FOUNDED: 1990

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$476,075 since 2009



Grantees build community and trust at the “Defensa del Territorio” (“Defense of our Territory”) convening organized by AJWS in February 2024. Photo by Citlali Fabián



BEYOND GRANTMAKING: How Does AJWS Make a Difference Around the World?

AJWS employs a three-part strategy to multiply our impact on three continents: We **fund** social change organizations working on key areas of human rights. We **accompany** our grantees with coaching, skill-building and resources, and bring them together to scale up their work and strengthen social movements. Meanwhile, in Washington and internationally, we **advocate** for laws and policies that promote global human rights. To accomplish this, we:

- Support grantees for multiple years with flexible funding, because sustainable change takes time
- Invest in nascent organizations and help them grow bigger and stronger
- Address the root causes of human rights abuses
- Convene organizations that work on similar issues, enabling them to learn from each other and build allyship
- Help our grantees access global media platforms and foster their leadership on the international stage
- Ensure that women, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic and religious minorities and other marginalized groups remain at the center of all our social change efforts
- Advocate on Capitol Hill for foreign policy that advances human rights worldwide
- Conduct research and share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, advancing the field of human rights

JOIN US

We hope you'll support AJWS's work in Mexico and around the world. Here's how:

DONATE

Your contribution helps AJWS pursue global justice worldwide. Visit www.ajws.org/donate, call **800.889.7146** or send your contribution to:

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This publication was written by Tamar Karpuj Oren and edited by Leah Kaplan Robins. Design by Maya Geist and Aisha Purvis, art direction by Elizabeth Leih.

ABOVE In the Sierra Juárez mountain range of Oaxaca, AJWS grantee-partner UNOSJO works with Indigenous Zapotec communities to defend their lands, culture and rights. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik



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