

Habitat improvement project for “El Encanto”, Tapachula, Chiapas. Historical and regional context

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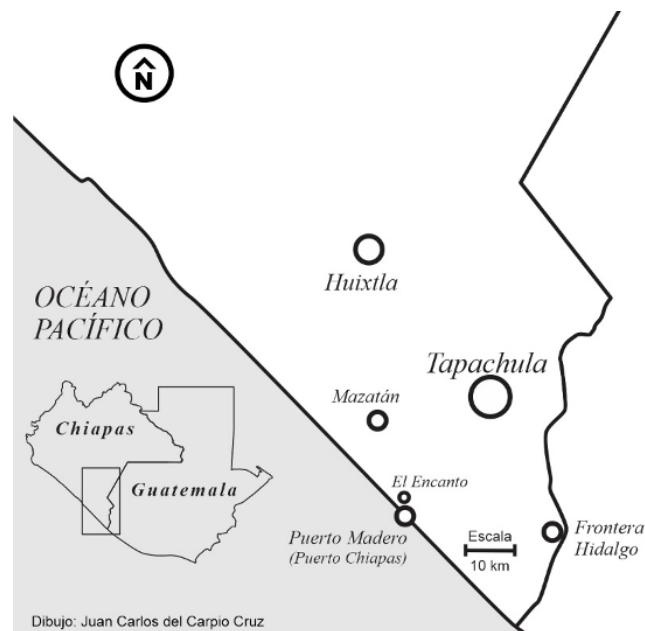
— *Abstract* —

In 2019, we carried out a diagnosis of the town "El Encanto" in Puerto Madero, Chiapas, to obtain field data on socioeconomic aspects, the population's health conditions, housing, habitat, and natural physical environment. The objective of the diagnosis was to provide empirical support for various proposals for intervention to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of the town. The team was formed by four professors (an architect, a civil engineer, an anthropologist, and a doctor), 49 students in the seventh semester of bachelor's degree in architecture, two students of social service of the same career, and a graduate of master's degree in architecture and urbanism of the School of Architecture of the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas. We will not offer the diagnosis' results or analyze the quantitative data obtained from the survey in this document; these results are presented, analyzed, and discussed in another document. What we do in this article is to draw attention to the need to contextualize the quantitative data obtained in the survey, providing a perspective of local and regional history, so that the numerical data used by the designers to make their intervention proposal, have an explanatory framework. Why is the town located in such an inappropriate place topographically? Why are the people there so poor and lacking in urban infrastructure? Who are these people? We maintain that the universe that architects, urban planners, and doctors intend to intervene and transform is the locality, and therefore the diagnosis is reduced to that scale, thus the data collected must be interpreted concerning processes of regional scale and long duration, so we focus our gaze on the economic, sociocultural and environmental changes of the Soconusco from the late nineteenth century to the present to understand the context in which the studied locality arises and develops and its problems.

Keywords:

Southern Frontier; Soconusco; Central America; Long-duration processes.

Towns like "El Encanto" inhabited by people without wealth and power are generally born as appendages of an economic process of a regional, national, or international character. The town under study is located on the southern border of Mexico, just 25 kilometers from the international demarcation line that divides Mexico with Central America, in the region known as Soconusco, which has been key in the emergence and development of various economic, political and even civilizational processes, as this place is one of the points where civilization emerged in Mesoamerica (Clark & Blake, 1993). The objective of this document is to provide a historical and regional framework for the interpretation of the economic, sociocultural, and environmental processes of the town "El Encanto", the municipality of Tapachula, Chiapas (see map 1). The users of the information generated will be the designers of the housing and equipment projects for the locality so that the interventions that are proposed at the habitat scale consider the general context in which the mentioned site is located.



Map 1. "El Encanto" and its surrounding area. Source: Own elaboration

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a first step, in cabinet and using *Google Earth* a cartographic and statistical review of the region was made, locating, and hierarchizing the network of roads, towns, and cities, the pattern of settlements, land uses and bodies of water. Subsequently, fieldwork was carried out in the area and in the

locality, which included interviews with key informants, focus groups, and boat tours of the coastal channels to observe and photograph the fishing sites and the areas of final disposal and treatment of solid and liquid waste, as well as a tour of the port facilities.¹ As a final step, before the drafting of the diagnosis presented to the Instituto de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación del Estado de Chiapas (ICTI), a bibliographic review was carried out to frame historically and geographically the data obtained in the field, which is what is presented in this document.

3. RESULTS

The Soconusco and regional dynamics from the delimitation of the Mexico-Guatemala border

In 1882 the Boundary Treaty between Mexico and Guatemala was signed, beginning in the region a period of economic bonanza, since the treaty gave legal certainty to foreign and national investors interested in the cultivation, benefit, and trade of coffee, which in Guatemala had been produced commercially for more than 50 years, since the time of the founder of that nation, Rafael Carrera, who ruled the country from 1844 to 1865, a period during which coffee generated 50% of GDP, being the origin of the main transformations of the country (Del Carpio Penagos, 2017; 2018).

The Boundary Treaty sign was a consequence of the demand for land to expand this crop and the fertile mountain slopes of Soconusco and the Guatemalan Boca Costa offered these in large and unbeatable virgin extensions. But there were no legal conditions guaranteeing ownership of the land, as it was an undefined international border. However, since the signing of the treaty, many foreign and national entrepreneurs invested in Soconusco in the development of coffee plantations. One of them was the Spaniard Bruno García Mijares, who, in addition to owning several properties in the coffee area as well as in the coastal plain, including "La Alianza", took on the task of rebuilding the port of San Benito, opened in 1861, to give way to the agricultural and extractive production of the region. Bruno García was a businessman with broad interests, also dedicating himself to the transport

1 The project: "Habitat improvement project for "El Encanto", the town of Puerto Madero, Tapachula, Chiapas", Key: ID-1033 (2019), was funded by the Instituto de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación del Estado de Chiapas (ICTI). The statistical results, as well as the different proposals for housing improvement and introduction of infrastructure and urban equipment can be consulted in Escamiroso *et al.*, 2020, "Reconstrucción del hábitat en comunidades rurales de Chiapas: caso de estudio Ocuilapa y El Encanto" (Online): www.AcademiaJournals.com and the Technical Report of the project (Escamiroso *et al.*, 2020), in Red Investiga ICTI (Online): <https://RedInvestiga.chiapas.gob.mx>

and trade of goods, as well as the production of electrical energy, a fluid from which he supplied the city of Tapachula until 1937 when the government of Lázaro Cárdenas created the Federal Electricity Commission.

In the final years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, the coffee production of the plantations located in the upper parts of the Soconusco region was brought to Tapachula by mules. This city was the center of the collection of all the production and there were established numerous companies that benefited from the grain: they shelled it, dried it, removed the shell, weighed it, and bagged it. Don Bruno had interests in all phases of the process.

Once transformed into a profitable commercial product, as it was desired by a growing market in Europe and the United States, coffee was transported in hundreds of ox-drawn carts through the plain that separates Tapachula from the Pacific beaches, passing through the town of Mazatán, which was a relay station of the teams, where the animals that dragged the carts from Tapachula were replaced by others that completed the journey to the beach of San Benito, where Don Bruno rebuilt and enlarged the cabotage port that served the trade of the region since the times of Juárez. Each wagon carried a ton of weight in goods, mainly coffee, although coal, salt, wood, and bananas were also exported.²

The port consisted of a wooden pier that went into the sea as far as a large "shepherd" could anchor; each of these boats was handled by six rowers and loaded with up to 10 tons. Through them, the coffee was carried on the boats that anchored 3 kilometers offshore to avoid running aground. It was these ships that took coffee to New York, Hamburg, London, and other large urban centers of the world, where the grain, originating from the Ethiopian plateaus, generated new habits of consumption, relationships, and use of time, at the end of the nineteenth century. Each ship was loaded with up to 5,000 tons, says Don Tito Rivera, an elderly inhabitant of El Encanto, a descendant of one of the founders of the Puerto Madero ejido.

The arrival of the railroad to Tapachula in 1908, connected Soconusco with the rest of the country and began the decline of the emporium of Don Bruno, who tried to stay in the business of transporting goods by building a port like San Benito in the region of the Guatemalan Bocacosta, a place he

2 Karl Helbig, a German geographer who made his classical studies on the geography of Chiapas in the 60s, reports, in a book called *El Soconusco y su zona cafetalera en Chiapas* (1964: 114), that San Benito was significantly enlarged from 1895, in the middle of Porfirismo. It was these works that Don Bruno García carried out, that allowed him to operate the port terminal as his property. He probably enjoyed a concession given by the government of Porfirio Díaz, as in those years it was customary to do, to promote the capitalist development of the country.

would call Puerto Miniso. For that, he ordered to bring everything necessary from Europe with the ship *Sisoste*, which had the misfortune of running aground, thus losing the investment and accelerating the final ruin of Don Bruno. Its workers meanwhile survived by working the properties of San José, Santa Rita, and Juan Grande, which Don Bruno had granted them to keep them cohesive, thus giving rise to the population and ejido of Puerto Madero, founded in 1942. There were 42 families who founded the town, among them, the brothers Ernesto, Rafael, Ricardo and Humberto Estrada Vázquez, as well as Francisco Sánchez Baños.

The economy of Soconusco has always been of an extractive type, of the enclave, which consists of producing wealth that is exported to other regions of the country and the world, remaining the local population and the region practically without significant changes or being these very slow dynamics, thus guaranteeing its role as producer of wealth for the benefit of foreign elites.

However, during the 40s some transformations began to take place in the regional landscape. By then the original ejidos had increased their population and received extensions of their territories. Gradually, the productive infrastructure was also expanded with the construction of irrigation systems and roads in the coastal plain, which stimulated agricultural diversification, soil fertility, and work and investment efficiency.

Per the creation and expansion of ejidos in the area, which was largely a way of breaking the power that German farmers had come to have in Soconusco, a potentially dangerous situation for the country and the United States in the context of World War II; the Mexican state embarked on the creation of new productive infrastructure in the region and the improvement of the existing one. Between 1947 and 1952, irrigation systems were built in Suchiate and Cacaohatán for cocoa production on almost 6 thousand hectares. Until 1958, seven thousand hectares of alluvial soils had been irrigated on the Suchiate River in 1658, and similar works were planned on the other rivers in the region. The irrigation systems required the construction of bridges, embankments, and canals that affected the tributaries by the generation of sediments. On the other hand, deforestation always accompanies agricultural and extractive activities, which are increased with open communication routes and with the construction of irrigation systems, thus accelerating the erosive process of the watersheds, modifying the physical, chemical, and mechanical parameters of the water currents, which affects, of course, other levels of associated ecosystems, such as lagoon systems and pampas and estuaries.

In the 60s, the already by then old railway road began to become obsolete with the paving of the coastal highway of Chiapas, which in 1964 linked more expeditiously Tapachula and the other cities of the coast, such

as Huixtla and Tonalá, with Tuxtla Gutiérrez and the rest of Chiapas and the country, increasing the traffic of private vehicles and cargo and passenger transport, all activities that allowed the emergence of a thriving tertiary sector, the tasks of the government grew and diversified, trade multiplied.

In the 70s, when the construction of Puerto Madero (today Puerto Chiapas) began and "El Encanto" emerged, a policy of drainage of swamps and other wetlands on the coast of Chiapas began, through drains, the rectification of channels, boards, and drains collectors. The project sought to intensify the use of land for agricultural purposes, meaning another very strong blow to lagoon ecosystems by the extraction of water from rivers for irrigation, modifying the topography of the region.³

The 70s, the welfare state

The former workers of Don Bruno, who became ejidatarios in the town that they decided to call Puerto Madero, in honor of the hero of the Mexican revolution Francisco I. Madero turned to shrimp fishing, whose wealth was discovered by 3 Japanese ships that sailed the Soconusco coast in 1945, at the beginning of the Second World War, with the mission of installing a radio station in La Palma, municipality of Acapetahua⁴, as well as exploring the marine waters and the coast, highlighting the great abundance of shrimp, sharks, and flake species, which fed on the organic wealth provided by the numerous rivers that descend from the highlands of the Soconusco mountain range. Subsequently, in Salina Cruz, in the isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, shipyards were built and fishing companies were established that operated with boats.

In Chiapas, it was until 1970 that the shrimp, shark, and fishing extraction of Puerto Madero was organized, with the creation of a fishing cooperative, the establishment of a technical fishing school, and the construction of a fleet composed of seven vessels of 72 feet in length, which could be loaded with 30,000 liters of diesel and 20,000 liters of water. The boats had an autonomy of 20 days and were equipped with 5 crew members and a team of 60 feet on each side of the boat, in addition, they were provided with a cooling system in their warehouses to freeze the captured species. These ships were the *Puerto Madero*, built in Salina Cruz; the *Tapachula*, built in Veracruz shipyards; the *Chiapa de Corzo*, the *Tuxtla Gutiérrez* and the *San*

3 Field information indicates that flooding problems in the urban area of "El Encanto" worsened when the Tapachula-Puerto Madero highway was paved and widened, as the natural slopes and runoff channels were modified.

4 The Japanese settled in El Soconusco in 1897, when a group of 36 settlers founded Escuintla, the Enomoto colony (Kerber Palma, 2017).

Cristóbal, built in Topolobampo, Sinaloa and the *Bonampak* and the *Chamula*, armed in Mazatlan, also in Sinaloa.

Among the first fishermen of the port were Tereso Ramos and his sons Tereso, Natalio, and Daniel Ramos López, originally from Tapanatepec, Oaxaca, who fished with cayuco in the Cabildos Lagoon various species of scales such as bream, sea bass, and snapper; they were also those who years later introduced the use of trammel with sleeves of different sizes made of cotton yarns of nine and twelve and with three and four fingertips mesh. Others fished from the beach with berths and others used harpoons to catch large steels. The first fish buyers in Puerto Madero were Manuel Chacón and Gonzalo Matías. However, the dredging works of the port changed the physical parameters of the lagoons and their waters, since seawater was introduced to them, while the freshwater that came from the mountains decreased and degraded through an extraordinary influx of rivers that formed during the rainy mountain range, favoring the appearance and predominance of new species and the decrease and loss of others.

The early 1970s were a boom for fishermen, who went so far as to export 60,000 pounds of shrimp to San Francisco and San Diego, California, making huge profits. The business was going so well, that the company had in addition to its fleet, four more boats in a joint lease with a private company called Toyloca, with which it was in a partnership 45-55 (45% for the cooperative and 55% for Toyloca). The private company bore the expenses of fuel, maintenance, and equipment, in addition to paying the salary of the employer and the motorist. The cooperative paid the salary of the crane driver, who was responsible for keeping the product in optimal condition for the United States market, the sailor, who oversaw the nets and other fishing gear, and the cook.

Shark fishing was also a very important economic activity. It was a man from Tapachula named Leoncio Molet Coutiño, whose parents were furniture merchants in that city, who formed the first offshore fishing cooperative. Leoncio bought two boats equipped with stationary Lister engines, which made them slow. They fished with a hoof, with inappropriate hooks 20 centimeters long, which prevented catching the largest specimens, they managed to escape after straightening the harpoons with their strong jaws. Leoncio brought Justo Criollo from Alvarado, Veracruz, the first to start catching sharks using nets, which he carried by boats up to about 50 kilometers offshore. More than 600 25-foot-long boats equipped with 75-horsepower outboard engines, each making three trips a week to the high seas, and returning loaded with up to two tons of product, came into operation. Puerto Madero was in those years the first national place in shark capture. Today the overexploitation has ended with the activity, being

necessary to go up to 300 kilometers inside the sea to catch some specimens, making their capture unaffordable.

In 1975 gill nets were introduced, and the brothers Hilario, Conrado, and Héctor Hernández Villatoro were the first ones to use them. Meanwhile, Yiyo, from Veracruz, was the first to use echo sounders to locate fishing sites, specializing in catching huachinango, grouper, goat, chicken, and grouper.

In addition to the local fleet, called "Sociedad Cooperativa de Producción Pesquera Puerto Madero", boats from the "Progresista Istmeña" cooperative, which had 35 boats, and "La Suriana", with 26 boats, arrived in the coastal waters of Chiapas, both based in Salina Cruz. Also arriving were boats from Mazatlan and Topolobampo, Sinaloa.

According to the bonanza, in 1972 the state decided to promote the creation of an industrial development hub in the area, where companies processing marine products, fishmeal factories, and others were to be installed. For this, the federal government expropriated the lands near the coast, dispossessing the inhabitants of Puerto Madero and the ranchers of the area of their ejido plots and agricultural properties, who returned to the nation so that a high seas port could be built there, which should, according to the project, be the exit door for the agricultural production and raw materials of Chiapas and the entry of goods from various countries of the Pacific basin. However, none of this happened, or at least not on the scale on which it was imagined.

The port has not been operational because, despite so many works to avoid its mud, the strong waves that burst from the sea drag large amounts of sand towards the beach, decreasing its depth constantly, preventing large boats, such as cruise ships and ocean liners, from docking on its docks, limiting its operation to shallow vessels, such as fishing boats and private yachts.

The emergence of the colony "El Encanto"

The works to erect the port required large quantities of building materials, including brick of baked clay. This is how the "El Encanto" colony originated in the early 1970s, with construction workers who came in search of employment in the port works and who stayed to live in marginal and higher-risk areas, such as the floodplains near the port, where bricks emerged next to the access road to the town of Puerto Madero. People arrived from all over Chiapas and other states of the country, attracted by the supply of labor, among them some who knew the trade of making bricks and quickly identified the optimal quality of the alluvial soils of the area, thus starting the elaboration of this material to supply the demand not only of the works of Puerto Madero but also in Tapachula, which in those years of abundance

also expanded towards its peripheries, with the opening of new roads and the improvement of others, as well as new infrastructure and housing areas.

The first bricklayers were people who came from the Morelos colony, four kilometers away. Among the first were the Estradas, the Espinosas, the Molinas, the Matías Urreas (Adolfo Matías and his sons Eleazar and Cesar Matías), Juan Carlos Flores Cabrera and Juan Cortés. From Tabasco came an individual named Román Soto Balmaceda, who made a contract with the port administration to supply him with bricks. Don Román hired several people from Tehuantepec to do the bricks and so Isaías Pérez, Enefino López Castañón and Jorge López arrived. Don Román was a capitalist who financed production, and this contract considerably increased his fortune by becoming a builder. Nowadays their children run a construction company and have contracts to build roads, "they are very rich," says a resident of "El Encanto."

The activity also attracted non-regular laborers who roamed the ranches engaging in various unskilled activities. Several of these walking pawns settled in the colony as they found stable jobs in the brickworks. In those years, the landscape of the place was composed of several brick ovens scattered in the land full of weeds. The first houses of the village were the huts of the owners and pawns of the bricks, next to the ovens and drying areas of the raw bricks.

By 1989 there were already eleven houses occupied by Juan Cortés and his family, Isaías Pérez, Horacio Martín Urrea, Jesús Lastres, Vicente Zavala Vilchis, Isaías Zebadúa de León, Cecilio Cortés López, Agustín Cortés López, Elena Matías Urrea (Horacio's daughter), Oscar Tercero, Juan García Soriano, and that year Edi Chacón Flores, originally from Frontera Hidalgo, was added. The Cortés López, on the other hand, are native to Huixtla.

The roof of the houses of the place was of real palm, the same that has been maintained until the present day despite the increasing use of galvanized sheets, so it has a lot of demand in construction. It is a material produced by private ranchers in the area. As of today, November 2019, the price of a thousand sheets is 3,000.00 pesos put in place, so the transfer must be paid by the user. To cover a square meter of surface, 30 leaves are needed, so that with a thousand, a little more than 30 square meters are covered. The walls and structure of the houses are made of weeping bamboo rods, which are purchased at 30.00 pesos per piece. The thickest and most resistant, which perform structural functions, have a value of 60.00 pesos per piece. The beams and tie rods of the houses are made of coconut wood, which is sold sawn at 20.00 pesos per linear meter or 200.00 pesos per 7-meter tree, from which four 8 x 8 cm poles can be obtained. It is a very hard wood that does not sting. Bamboo is also used. To prevent it from being

chopped, the bamboo must be cut at dawn on the fourth day after the full moon, a period that the coast people call "the seasoning moon."

All these families lived from making bricks, thousands daily, but during the government of Manuel Velasco Coello (2012-2018), the administration of the port built the fence to enclose the lands of the industrial park, the lands where they extracted the land were protected by the fence, so the main source of income of the villagers of El Encanto became extinct, subjecting them to new conditions to achieve their reproduction. Today there are still two or three people who are still engaged in its elaboration but buy the raw material with the private owners of the neighborhood, who sell them trucks of land, as well as the fuel to burn it, mango firewood.

The cost of six cubic meters of land is 1000.00 pesos, mango wood is 700.00 pesos a load, and to burn a batch of eight thousand bricks two loads are used, while the cost of labor for making a thousand bricks is 400.00 pesos. A thousand bricks are sold in advance, at 1000 pesos per thousand, so the real beneficiaries of this industry are the owners of the Tapachula material stores, which sell the product at \$2300.00 per thousand.⁵

Officially the colony is an ejido, an agrarian nucleus that, by decree, received land for its subsistence and housing. The territory of the ejido is divided into three separate fractions. In other words, their territory does not form a continuous geographical unit, but they are three fractions:

1. Agua Prieta, formerly known as Juan Grande, is a fraction of 50 hectares of flat and floodable land, which previously was a ranch belonging to an individual named Nibardo Betanzos, yielded by the government to the settlers in 1992. In the dry season, the swamp becomes a pasture where some heads of cattle grazing, and also some African palm plants subsist, but as the land is salty these almost do not produce fruits, so they do not constitute a source of income for the peasants or if they do it is very marginal. In addition, the land is in dispute with a group of people from Puerto Madero, who through deception and collusion managed to write it in their favor, thus generating a legal conflict for the possession of the property. A local inhabitant, originally from an island town, reports the existence of a Asociación Civil Encanto Moctezuma A. C., founded in 2006 to manage the regularization of land tenure.

Lemon, mango, tamarind, guanabana, cherimoya, chicozapotes, mamey, papaya, and cashew trees thrive very well in the non-salty

5 September 2019 prices.

- areas of the property, and it is even possible to make plantations with these products, which are in great demand in urban markets.
2. La Esperanza, a fraction of 19 hectares, was originally owned by Elodia Pérez and awarded to the settlers in 2004. This property was expropriated by the government to be incorporated into the Puerto Chiapas Industrial Park.⁶
 3. The Mansion, a land of 21 hectares, whose original owner was Manuela Barceló Cigarroa, was awarded to the colony also in 2004, but like the previous one, expropriated by the government to incorporate into the surface of the industrial park.

During the few years that the land was theirs, each settler had twelve ropes of surface, in addition to an urban lot to build their home. But as usually happens, most of them, forced by necessity, sold their rights to the luckiest comrades. So nowadays, of all the families that inhabit the colony, only ten of them own land in the Agua Prieta fraction, for an area that goes from three to five hectares per family.

In 2007, they parceled the land where the village is located, dividing it into grids of 20 x 20 meters (400 square meters), although some obtained smaller lots.

As a result of the recent construction of the industrial park, the already floodable lands in which the colony is located were further damaged because the floods during the rainy season worsened, causing at that time of year the inhabitants of the village to have to take refuge in the shelters of the city of Tapachula, so they have sold the land and houses when they find a buyer, although most commonly they leave them, emigrating to other places and leaving the properties in the hands of those who decide to stay.

Brief Life Stories

Eva is originally from Tuxtla Chico, she arrived at El Encanto already married in 1985. She and her husband are originally from Frontera Hidalgo, where they worked as temporary laborers on the ranches. They settled in "El Encanto" because they found permanent work in brickworks. They got the house where they currently live from a family who migrated, leaving them the land and the hut in exchange for a promise of payment that was never fulfilled.

6 The town of Puerto Madero, which has gradually acquired the character of a city, retains this name, and the name of Puerto Chiapas has been invented, for the federal area where the military and the port's civil government operate the facilities are located so that they dock the boats, the yacht club or Marina Chiapas and the polygons destined for industrial and commercial use.

Tito. He was born in Puerto Madero on October 4, 1938, so he is more than 80 years old and knows by heart specific data about the history of Puerto Madero and "El Encanto". He is the son of a founder of Puerto Madero, a former worker of Don Bruno García. He has been a political leader and representative of Mexico in forums on the fishing activity at the international level. In 1973, Don Tito brought from Ecuador the knowledge of commercial fish breeding in fish farms. He was a representative of his organization, the Sociedad Cooperativa Pesquera de Puerto Madero, at an event in the Andean country, which in those years also had a buoyant fishing industry, as did Peru. Tito was the founder of the Centro de Estudios Tecnológicos del Mar (CESMAR) number 24, located in Puerto Madero. In the colony, its house is spacious, built with coconut wood, bamboo, bagpipes, and galvanized sheet. In a spacious covered area, it sells beans, corn, and other grains and grocery products. Tito and his daughter serve their customers and also have, in their yard, a facility for the breeding of bream, which has come to produce them in thousands, supplying the local demand, since, even though the inhabitants of this place have access to the estuaries of the Lagoon of Cabildos, fishing gear, and fish are needed to catch, and both are lacking, because years ago the estuaries stopped producing because its structure was altered by the dredging works of the port and by the overexploitation of resources. There Tito has found an opportunity for his product.

Edi. He was born in Rancho San Joaquín Cosalapa, in the municipality of Frontera Hidalgo, Chiapas. He's a boarder man. He came to live in El Encanto in 1989.

Idolina. She is 60 years old and is originally from Revolución Mexicana, in the municipality of Villa Corzo, in the center of Chiapas. Idolina's father was a bricklayer in the Mexican Revolution and came to work on the elaboration of this material at El Encanto, Idolina was 14 years old when they arrived in 1974. In the brickwork she met her husband, who took her to live in Tuxtla Chico for a few years, returning to El Encanto, where they currently live.

Elena. She is the daughter of one of the two bricklayers in the town who are still engaged in this activity. It is a large family that has a large plot in a corner of the village, where there is the brick kiln, the house of walls and wooden structure and galvanized sheet roof, as well as several fruit trees and a vegetable garden. She is a great manager of equipment and infrastructure for the town. She oversees a company that produces bottled water that covers the demand of the town and Puerto Madero. The company was funded by a major league baseball player through an American religious

organization. Annually, the company is supervised by members of the organization, who verify that the production complies with the rules of hygiene and administrative management. Elena is also the manager of the domestic water distribution system that in November 2019 began to give tap water to the inhabitants of the town. The water of the company as well as that of the system comes from deep wells, so both the infrastructure required for extraction, storage, and distribution, as well as the operation of the network, is very expensive. So water management demands a high commitment from Elena. It is through it that institutions external to the town, such as the municipal water system of Tapachula or the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, are related to the town. Her role as a manager makes her an intermediary between external institutions and local society.

Soconusco today

The Soconusco is the natural bridge between Mexico and Central America since it connects both the Pacific coast and the mountainous area of the Cuchumatanes mountain range and the Sierra Madre, the Highlands, and the Central Depression of Chiapas. Food products, beers, alcohol, household appliances, migrants from all over the world seeking to reach the United States, prostitution, drugs, and weapons are introduced through the roads that cross this region. Some of these goods go from north to south and others in the opposite direction. Weapons, for example, go from north to south, as well as appliances, beers, alcohol, and agricultural products, goods that are cheaper in Mexico than in Guatemala, so merchants and smugglers enter Mexico to sell with a considerable profit margin in the markets of the Highlands and in El Quiché, where they come from. Almost all other commodities, such as drugs, migrants, prostitution, and people, go from south to north, seeking the "American dream."

Although the region was integrated into the world market and attracted a large and diverse population of the world, from the end of the 19th century, Tapachula took until the end of the 30s and early 40s to become a city (Camas Reyes; 1995: 36), connected in those years mainly with the center of the country through the railroad and with cities abroad through Puerto San Benito (later Puerto Madero and today Puerto Chiapas). Communication with the center of Chiapas was weak since the roads that connected it to the center of Chiapas were barely covered with dirt in 1932, that of the coast and 1934 that of the mountain range, which passes through Motozintla, both following a trace that dates from colonial times and even further back.

To the extent that the road network was expanded and the productive infrastructure increased, the urban area was also expanded with the emer-

gence of new colonies, a situation that gained greater relevance from the 1970s, a period in which, as we have said lines back, the region had its good times. In the service sector, the sale of improved seeds, fumigation companies, sale of agrochemicals, warehouses, and transport companies flourished. Many of those who were attracted by the job offer stayed to live in Tapachula or its surroundings, as we have seen with "El Encanto", a colony founded by migrants from other parts of Chiapas and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

The coffee industry also attracted to the region numerous Chinese, brought as workers for agricultural enterprises but quickly became independent to engage in their activities, services, and commerce. The Japanese also arrived and founded a colony in Escuintla. Germans, Swiss, Spaniards, Americans, Lebanese, and Syrians, among others, also arrived as entrepreneurs, skilled workers, or merchants and settled in the city and the farms and villages of the region, so that it is a region and localities whose population is culturally, economically, and ideologically very diverse.

Today, Tapachula is a city of between 350,000 and 400,000 inhabitants. In the 2010 census, it officially had 320,451 inhabitants, making it the second largest city in Chiapas, after Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital. At the same time, urban, environmental, social, and political problems of all kinds have also been growing and multiplying: the collapse of infrastructure and collective equipment, high demand for housing and low production, depletion, pollution and loss of agricultural soils, the emergence of pests, floods; degradation and depletion of water sources, organized crime, gangs, migrant caravans; a pandemonium both in its meaning of confusion, noise, and screams and in what it means "gathering of demons".

The neoliberal policies and wars unleashed by the United States in the Middle East have destroyed the societies of the third world, leaving large contingents of its inhabitants as the only alternative for survival emigration to Western Europe and the United States.

Just as North Africa, Turkey, and the eastern borders of Europe have become the main points of containment for migrants seeking to reach the cities of advanced capitalism in Western Europe, Soconusco, and particularly the city of Tapachula, has become the strategic point for applying the policy of containment to migration seeking to reach the United States. Mexico has to play the role of filter and receiver of migrants that the United States refuses to receive. Let us remember that these caravans are the product of an economic policy imposed on weak nations by the United States.

The National Institute of Migration estimates that, only from January to June 2019, 460,000 undocumented migrants entered Mexico through the border with Guatemala, most of them through Tapachula. The contingents, while

still predominantly Central American, are also now made up of many people of African, Arab, and Asian origin, adding to the missing ingredients, the potential danger of terrorists hiding among them, as well as health threats.⁷

Dr. René Estrada Arévalo, a prominent member of the university community, is concerned that a global pandemic will reach the country through Soconusco, and the Mexican state lacks the necessary infrastructure, personnel, and protocols to deal with it. The thesis of this professor of the UNACH refers to the conjunction of the great richness of the biodiversity of the Soconusco, which, together with the intense migratory flow in all its modalities -legal, temporary, of passage, etc.-, produce extreme conditions of risk in health. In a framework that considers health as a public and universal good and in the context of the national security of the country, he proposes that to protect the migrant and resident population of the region, a health shield be established to strengthen health security in Soconusco.

There are so many aspects that go beyond the government's capacity to respond. Everything is urgent, the sanitation of rivers, estuaries, and lagoons; ensure the supply of drinking water, mitigate, or reverse the negative impact of waste solid, liquid, and gaseous discharges to ecosystems; reduce the degradation of agricultural soils; equip the localities with sanitary, health, education, culture and training services. Migration, criminal violence, diseases...

7 During the days when the fieldwork that gave rise to this article was done, the worldwide news with which TV news and news agencies saturated us daily was the threat of the Wuhan coronavirus, which by then had already caused the death of hundreds of people for a few weeks. A year later, the coronavirus had claimed the lives of more than 2 million people around the world, also causing the collapse of global tourism and other branches of the economy associated with it, generating changes in working conditions and education and health systems. The coronavirus pandemic did indeed prove that no one was prepared to face a threat of such magnitude.

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