Threats of a monetized global economy to indigenous livelihoods: the case of Santa Fe de la Laguna in Mexico

As has been widely documented, indigenous communities around the world have a very close link with nature. Much of their livelihoods, including social organization, are based on a direct use of natural resources. During the last decades, many indigenous communities have been increasingly immersed in a monetized economy, which has led them to modify livelihoods and the relationship with nature. In many cases, this has also meant the modification of social structures and cultural local institutions.

The indigenous community of Santa Fe de la Laguna (ICSFL), in Mexico, has been experiencing these changes for several decades. It is a community with a strong indigenous identity, governed by habits and customs that norm rights and obligations of its people. Access to natural resources is given under a collective management structure to those who fulfill obligations and positions in the community, many of which are related to festivities and other cultural practices. However, there has been a shift in local livelihoods that may threaten the sustainability (economic, ecological, social and political) of the indigenous community’s system.

Through an ethnographic approach, semi-structured interviews and participatory mapping workshops, in this research I documented how the transition to a more monetized economy based on trade is threatening the indigenous sociocultural structure of rights, obligations and positions in the community. I found a shift in the community’s livelihoods from traditional activities (agriculture, forestry and fisheries), to an economy based on the production of handicrafts (pottery) and trade of these and other external products. In one hand, pottery production intensifies the extraction of soil and firewood, which is further pressured by an increased dependency on a monetized economy. On the other hand, the escalation of trade and the abandonment of traditional activities are diminishing people’s links to nature that could impact on their links with the community’s sociocultural and institutional systems.

The sustainability of the whole system should not be seen in isolation between its different elements (economic, ecological, cultural and political structure). The most valued practices and beliefs of the community may become untenable in face of livelihood transformations that respond to the global monetized economy.