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Offsetting the `Iron Law of Oligarchy': The Ebb and Flow of Leadership Accountability in a Regional Peasant Organization

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# Offsetting the Iron Law of OLIGARCHY

## *The Ebb and Flow of Leadership Accountability in a Regional Peasant Organization*

Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández



Panel taken from *Historia Campesina*, a comic book created by the Unión de Ejidos Lázaro Cárdenas (UELCO) after research and interviews by the authors of this article sparked local interest. The UELCO's illustrated history recounts its defense of members' interests in response to fluctuating governmental rural development policies since 1974. This panel describes the fledgling organization's mobilization to counteract a monopoly by the region's fertilizer supplier.

Most leaders of large membership organizations tend to put their own interests ahead of those they claim to represent. This is no surprise; it is one of the perennial problems of representative democracy, affecting institutions as varied as legislatures, labor unions, and local parent-teacher associations. Leaders seem to "take off" from their base with considerable frequency in membership organizations, and this is a problem of special concern for those who contend that national development in the Third World depends on the emergence and consolidation of a dense web of democratic grassroots development institutions.

Ever since Roberto Michels wrote of the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" in his 1911 book *Political Parties*, some social scientists have maintained that large membership organizations inevitably evolve from democratic intentions to bureaucratized, elite control. The problem is especially pronounced for poor people, who must organize to express and defend their interests. Their only inherent strength lies in numbers, and their greatest potential strength is in self-reliance. To take advantage of both, organization is required. Organizations take on their own dynamics, however, as leaders and staff develop interests that differ from those of the members. Opportunities to pursue political power, to benefit economically, or to pursue hidden agendas seduce leaders and staff away from representing membership concerns. In this view, new elites always manage to entrench themselves.

Familiar as this problem sounds, exceptions also spring to mind. In many cases, larger grassroots groups undergo a series of swings toward and away from democracy, with changing degrees of leadership accountability at different points in their history. What was posed by Michels as an all-powerful "law" turns out instead to be a strong, but far from invincible, *tendency*. Research into the dynamics of membership participation throughout the histories of large grassroots organizations can help to refine our understanding of changing degrees of leadership accountability.

In an effort to understand better

why democracy defeats oligarchy at some points in an organization's history and not at others, a study of a large, regional, Mexican peasant organization in the state of Nayarit—the Unión de Ejidos "Lázaro Cárdenas" (UELC)—was undertaken with the support of the Inter-American Foundation. This study analyzed a key dimension of organizational decision-making: accountability. Accountability involves rank-and-file oversight over leadership, is usually bolstered by direct membership participation in group decision-making, and has a major impact on the extent to which grassroots organizations reflect the priorities and concerns of their members.

### FRAMING THE STUDY

To frame research questions, it was necessary to refine the concept of accountability. "Accountability" refers to the members' capacity to hold leaders responsible for their actions. This requires the free flow of information, input into key hiring and firing decisions, some say in resource allocation, and a degree of veto power over leadership and staff actions.

Accountability also requires autonomy. Organizational autonomy is inherently relative, referring to a group's control over setting its own goals and making its own decisions without external domination, whether by governments, political parties, religious groups, or development agencies. But autonomy can cut both ways. It is essential if leaders are to fend off external threats and remain responsive to membership concerns, but it may also permit leaders to build up their own sources of bureaucratic, economic, political, or charismatic power, becoming autonomous from the membership as well.

Assuming, though, that an organization is relatively autonomous and its leaders representative, direct membership participation is still crucial to maintaining leadership accountability. When considering participation, it is useful to distinguish between membership and "followership." Conventional indicators of mass participation do not necessarily tell us much about this distinction since either active members or passive followers can produce large turnouts at public events or oc-

casions calling for voluntary labor. Nor does the operation of formal election procedures for choosing leaders necessarily either indicate active membership or guarantee accountability.

Active membership is difficult to define and identify. This study contends that the kind of membership action that is most likely to increase leadership accountability in large organizations occurs through channels that bring leaders and members closer to each other. To explain changing degrees of accountability in a large, consolidated, relatively democratic organization, this study charts the rise and fall of *intermediate instances of participation*, defined as formal or informal opportunities for members to make, carry out, and oversee important group decisions. When the rank and file has a role in making these decisions, the boundaries between leaders and members begin to break down.

The idea that participatory subgroups are necessary to keep larger groups democratic is not new. Democratic theorists have long held that national democracy depends on the checks and balances in society as well as in government. Classic political science contends that power must be decentralized among competing interest groups for democracy to work fairly. Relatively few researchers have looked at the workings of these social counterweights in terms of the "Iron Law of Oligarchy," however. Seymour Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman's landmark 1956 study, *Union Democracy*, is a notable exception. They explained a successful case of union democracy by analyzing the countervailing tendencies that offset the otherwise powerful and ever-present oligarchical pressures. This study pursues countervailing tendencies further, suggesting that within large organizations they result from opportunities for membership actions, that is, intermediate instances of participation.

Intermediate instances of participation refer more to processes than to particular events or formal interventions. Specifically, they are formal or informal opportunities for those other than the established leadership to exercise power within large organizations. There are four preconditions for the kinds of intermediate instances of

participation that reinforce leadership accountability: autonomous local-level free spaces; effective vertical and horizontal information channels; active participation of membership groups in project decision-making and oversight; and decentralization of leadership through systematic training and opportunities for leadership competition.

First, members need opportunities to get together on their own, to set their own agendas, to determine their own needs, to choose their own leaders, and to come to their own conclusions about how to defend their interests. These opportunities may be available through, for example, village assemblies, union locals, or neighborhood meetings, if they are sufficiently democratic.

Second, members need two-way communications channels to find out what the leaders at the top of the organization are doing. Only with a steady flow of information downwards will members be able to evaluate leaders and keep them "on track," if necessary. Only with a steady flow upwards will leaders be able to make decisions that are right for the members. Even democratic leadership selection every few years does not guarantee that leaders will know or respond to the views of the majority of the membership. While regular and frank mass assemblies are usually a part of the package, deliberate efforts are often needed to reach beyond the most interested core group. To make fully informed decisions, members also need to know what other members think about the leadership, which is especially difficult to discern in organizations linking many dispersed communities.

Third, to make sure that organizations focus on meeting members' needs, the members themselves must have opportunities to decide what the group should do and how. This means direct membership involvement in setting the organization's agenda and in overseeing development projects, as opposed, for example, to voting yes or no on a fait accompli without input beforehand or afterwards.

Fourth, decentralization of power through the development of new generations of community leaders is critical. Not only do community-level leaders link the rank and file to the

top leadership, they can also become an alternative to it if it ignores membership concerns. Decentralization of responsibility reduces the membership's dependence on any one leader or group of leaders. Community-level leaders usually need training and experience in region-wide activities, however. If this is to occur, some degree of power must be devolved to decision-making bodies that are relatively autonomous from the established leaders.

Together, this overlapping array of horizontal and vertical linkages encourages members to become active participants in decision-making, blurring the boundaries between leaders and members. Because the conditions encouraging intermediate instances of participation are rarely all present and effective at once, loss of leadership accountability and group autonomy are constant dangers, even for apparently successful grassroots organizations.

## SELECTING THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

While the issue of accountability is problematic in all kinds of membership groups, we focused on regional peasant organizations, key actors in the development process, for two principal reasons. First, regional organizations are crucial in democratizing the rural development process. In much of Latin America, the major obstacle to rural development is the entrenched power of allied regional elites from the public and private sectors. They often monopolize key markets, preventing peasants from retaining and investing the fruits of their labor. Regional peasant organizations are frequently the only groups that can free these markets and push for more broad-based rural development policies. Regional organizations are also crucial for defending freedom of assembly, creating a hospitable environment for further community organizing. Either local or national peasant groups arguably could do the same, but local groups are easily isolated by their enemies, while national peasant organizations are usually democratic only insofar as they are made up of representative, regional building blocks.

This study defines "regional" as describing an organization that brings together so many communities that it

is too big to be run by community-level direct democracy alone. Face-to-face forms of accountability and decision-making are therefore insufficient, and some degree of delegation of authority is required. The second reason for focusing on regional organizations, then, is that accountability is especially vulnerable in them because the leadership is often the only link among the many dispersed and diverse member communities. Except where indigenous traditions survive, horizontal linkages among remote communities rarely develop spontaneously, and require deliberate organizing efforts to be sustained.

The Unión de Ejidos "Lázaro Cárdenas" is nationally known in the Mexican peasant movement, and was selected as the subject of this study for three reasons. First, it is a large regional organization, bringing together 15 agrarian reform communities with over 4,500 families (about half of them indigenous), and is a longstanding, major, political and economic actor in the region. Second, it has a solid organizational track record, with clear evidence of significant membership participation and a willingness to engage in mass direct action as well as lobbying. Its history reveals wide swings between independence and governmental control. Third, the UELC's leaders and advisors were generously willing to collaborate with the study despite the sensitivity of the research questions, many of which dealt with internal operations.

Mexican agrarian reform communities, or *ejidos*, are both political and economic institutions, to which the government cedes land-use rights while retaining a "tutelary" role. *Ejidos* are governed by decisions of regular, ostensibly democratic, mass membership assemblies, but government officials also supervise *ejido* elections and often intervene. In practice, the formal institutional structure does not guarantee that *ejido* leaders represent the majority of the members. This depends on the actual balance of power between democratic forces within the community and political and economic elites, both inside and outside the community.

By the majority decision of assemblies, several *ejidos* can form unions to carry out regional agricultural

EN EL PUEBLO DE JOMULCO, SE CELEBRÓ LA BODA DE 2 MIEMBROS DE LA BRIGADA PIDER. FUE AHÍ DONDE SURGIÓ LA IDEA DE FORMAR UNA ORGANIZACIÓN.

¡FORMAR UNA UNIÓN DE EJIDOS!

APROVECHAR QUE LA GENTE ANDA ANIMADA...

Y GESTIONAR UNA CONCESIÓN DE FERTILIZANTES. ¡CONTROLARLO A NIVEL REGIONAL!



The idea to form a union of ejidos emerged at the wedding of two members of PIDER.

development projects. Assemblies elect delegates, who in turn elect the union's leadership and oversight committees. Rank-and-file members who are not delegates can participate in union meetings but cannot vote. Delegates to ejido unions are usually elected from outside the ranks of the ejido officers, creating parallel authority structures that often serve as counterweights.

Because of the often heavy hand of the state, most ejido unions either wither away or become government-run bureaucracies. For 15 years, the UELC has been among the exceptions, vigorously defending a wide range of member interests. From its birth, much of the UELC's history can be seen as a series of creative responses by a new generation of peasant leaders to changing government rural development policies.

The research methodology used to examine the UELC depended on extensive participant observation and on oral histories gathered from a wide range of people inside and outside the organization, including regional and local leaders, advisors, rank-and-file members, local, state, and federal officials, as well as independent development analysts. The case study is organized around a series of turning points in the UELC's history, which are defined as moments when key intermediate instances of participation either rose or fell, setting the stage for

subsequent patterns of relations between leaders and rank-and-file members.

#### A QUICK AND EASY BIRTH: WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM SOME FRIENDS

Southern Nayarit had experienced three previous waves of peasant mobilization before the UELC emerged: the unsuccessful 1857-1881 indigenous insurrection, the victorious 1933-1939 land reform movement, and the largely successful 1960s *comunero* movement by indigenous communities for the restitution of lands that had been usurped by private farmers and ranchers. The UELC emerged shortly after the *comunero* movement. After decades of government neglect of peasant agriculture, renewed rural development efforts included occasional support for increasingly independent peasant movements. In 1974, under the auspices of the federal government's new Programa de Inversiones en el Desarrollo Rural (PIDER), a dynamic team of community organizers brought leaders from several agrarian communities in the region together for the first time.

The reformist political climate had encouraged this new generation of younger, more representative community leaders to organize mass protests, pressuring the government to

break its alliance with local elites and end their monopoly on official credit and fertilizer supplies. The movement's quick successes showed that unity could mean strength, and the communities joined together to found a union of ejidos in 1975.

The UELC came together in spite of the existence of the official Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), which had long neglected producers' concerns in favor of electoral patronage. Joint teams of new ejido leaders and PIDER promoters convinced skeptical campesinos that the main purpose of the new organization—the UELC—was economic development rather than party politics. The UELC's combination of protest actions and lobbying, with help from PIDER, won the rights to a major government fertilizer distributorship. Mass participation continued, as the UELC built a huge new fertilizer warehouse with voluntary labor.

The birth of the UELC was the result of intermediate instances of participation at the local and regional levels. First, the ejidos themselves were revitalized as the new, more representative leadership came to power at the community level. Second, as these leaders joined together to demand a fairer deal from the government, their first ad hoc meetings laid the foundation for the formal delegate assemblies that later would lead the first peasant-managed, region-

wide development organization in the area.

## ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

The involvement of some community leaders and PIDER promoters in the popular 1976 Nayarit gubernatorial opposition movement led the UELC to be identified with the unsuccessful electoral challengers, in spite of its officially nonpartisan position. The political climate shifted, and the new governor expelled the PIDER organizers from the state. The UELC's loss of federal allies opened it up to intervention by the state government. This vulnerability was heightened by the leadership's overtly confrontational stance, which went beyond the position of much of the membership. The UELC's president even publicly refused to shake the new governor's outstretched hand.

The tide turned against the UELC when an official audit resulted in imprisonment of the leadership for fraud. In exchange for the leaders' release, the government used elections to impose its candidate on the Unión. Half the delegates, already aligned with the official CNC, supported the charges of fraud, while the rest defended the imprisoned president, largely as a matter of principle against government intervention.

The members were never able to come to their own conclusions about the fraud charges since the government confiscated the relevant records. Government officials imposed their candidate, a pliable CNC supporter little known outside his community. He promptly turned the UELC's principal asset, the fertilizer outlet, over to the government agricultural bank. At the same time, authorities cracked down on the two largest, poorest, and most active communities in the UELC, reportedly imprisoning over 50 people and issuing arrest warrants for many more, ostensibly because of conflicts about land boundaries with private farmers and ranchers.

This second turning point resulted from a swing toward over-centralized leadership with insufficient member support to compensate for the loss of federal allies. The leadership's failure to account adequately for its manage-



*The UELC's multifaceted housing project encouraged beneficiary participation and decentralized decision-making, milestones in the Unión's development.*

ment of UELC finances made it much easier for the government to pursue its divide-and-conquer strategy. The UELC lost its autonomy largely because of lack of leadership accountability and weak intermediate instances of participation, especially in the ejido delegate assembly.

## OPENING FROM ABOVE, REDEMOCRATIZATION FROM BELOW: THE COMMUNITY FOOD COUNCILS

The state government tried to reinforce its control over the UELC with huge infusions of resources for devel-

opment projects, but without grassroots participation in their design or implementation, the projects quickly failed. After a wave of demoralization, suspended assemblies, and the government takeover of the UELC's fertilizer outlet, a new federal food distribution program brought fresh external allies to the region in 1980. Community organizers came to form democratic, autonomous village-store management committees, which would in turn form a new, region-wide community food supply council to oversee the government's rural food distribution efforts. With access to trucks, organizers, and political legitimacy, inchoate dissatisfaction

with the UELC leadership crystallized into discreetly organized opposition, as communities regrouped and prepared to redemocratize the organization.

One of the promoters, a committed community organizer, took 15 ejido leaders to visit the most dramatic success story of peasant-managed regional development in Mexico at that time, the Coalición de Ejidos Colectivos de los Valles del Yaqui y Mayo (CECVYM), which is located in Sonora. This direct exposure to a practical alternative vision of the future inspired the community leaders to broaden and deepen their efforts to revive the peasant movement in the region, and to begin to network with other broad-based community food councils in neighboring states.

Representative leadership regained lost ground in the next round of ejido elections. The rising parallel leadership, based in the food council, was then able to confront the government-installed authorities in the UELC, informally relieve them of power, ratify the change through elections, and begin the process of reviving the UELC's autonomous economic development project.

This leadership transition was a key turning point for the UELC, setting a pattern it would follow for years to come. The community-based network that gained power included both new and more experienced leaders. They achieved a high level of unity and coordination in the process of organizing the food stores and the community food council, and of recovering control of the UELC itself. The alternative leadership meetings became open and formalized as the UELC's technical council. Their meetings came to play a key agenda-setting role for the next several years.

The UELC seemed back on track, but the alternative leadership had not agreed in advance on who should direct the organization. Two candidates emerged: one from UZETA, a small, relatively wealthy ejido that had always played a key role in the UELC leadership, and the other a venerable leader of the much poorer indigenous community of Jomulco. Although Jomulco itself accounted for the majority of the Unión's membership, this gave its candidate no special advantage since delegate voting power is by ejido or indigenous community

only, not by population. Nevertheless, Jomulco's leader won by a small margin, ushering in an extended period of broadened participation in decision-making.

The food council program created new opportunities for community-level and region-wide intermediate instances of participation that were effectively seized by UELC members. Organizing around one issue unleashed "social energy" that spilled over into other arenas. After the new round of ejido elections, the village store committees and the community food councils created, in effect, a democratic counterweight—a springboard from which to launch the revitalization of the UELC. The redemocratization of the Unión was the result of members getting together in legitimate free spaces within and across communities to decide the best way to defend their interests.

### DEVELOPMENT SPILLOVER: THE COMMUNITY-MANAGED HOUSING PROJECT

The UELC launched its rural community housing project in 1985, with government loans and lessons learned from the CECVYM's prior experience. Most UELC activities had been production-oriented, helping landed heads of households, but the housing program benefited many landless members of the community, especially adult children of ejidatarios. The UELC's team of four advisors, two of whom were veterans of the CECVYM experience, settled in the region and co-managed the housing project with peasant leadership. The close working relations between the advisors and the UELC deepened, reinforcing a relationship in which the advisors were clearly working for the organization, rather than vice versa.

The design of the housing project encouraged direct beneficiary participation and trained intermediate-level campesino activists to forge stronger links between the communities and the UELC leadership. Ejido assemblies decided who would receive construction loans and, together with the individual participants, decided how to manage the construction process.

The housing project was a turning point for UELC because it was the

organization's most decentralized, participatory development project. Equitable and efficient project implementation was reinforced by the systematic decentralization of decision-making. Creative leaders and advisors organized a wide range of intermediate instances of participation connected with the oversight and implementation of the project. The sharp contrast with the failed injection of government development resources during the official takeover of the UELC reinforced the view within the organization that project success depended on accountability and participation.

### TAKING IT TO THE STREETS: PUSHING FOR HIGHER CORN PRICES

As inflation soared and government subsidies fell during the mid-1980s, growing corn became more and more of a losing proposition. Across the country, coalitions of small- and medium-sized grain producers took peaceful protest actions to encourage agricultural policymakers to give more attention to the soaring costs of production.

Three waves of crop price mobilizations became the most dramatic expression of the UELC's power, as producers took over dozens of government warehouses. The movement peaked in a massive 10-day blockade of the Pan American Highway in 1987. The decision to take over the highway was made in mass ejido assemblies, and the one-hour-on, one-hour-off blockade involved over 3,000 peasants. The UELC then organized ejido assemblies alongside the highway, followed by assemblies of ejido delegates to the Unión. While this form of organization probably limited input from the many non-member participants, it also blocked reported efforts to infiltrate and disrupt the action, guaranteeing an autonomous decision-making process.

The ejido assemblies provided the crucial intermediate instances of participation in the crop price mobilizations. These democratic spaces kept the leadership in touch with the base and blocked possible external provocation. Membership participation was essential in maintaining the discipline needed to avoid giving the gov-



ernment any pretext for possible repression.

## THE "TRENCH ECONOMY": PEASANT WOMEN BECOME ACTORS

As prospects for making corn production profitable grew increasingly dim, the UELC's advisors elaborated a development strategy known as the "trench economy." This strategy was designed to increase regional self-sufficiency through household and community production of basic goods, especially food, in order to buffer the impact of inflation "imported" from the rest of the economy.

Peasant women were major actors in the local informal economy, but most lacked organizing experience. At the urging of wives of active ejido members, women met in their communities to analyze the cost of living as part of the campaign for higher crop support prices. With UELC advisors, the women developed a series of projects that revived the traditional "backyard economy." The Inter-American Foundation supported this development strategy through research on soils and organic fertilizer to deal with declining yields, a women's turkey production project, and a related feed-grain-mixing operation. Women of the UELC thus became crucial to the organization's "trench economy" strategy.

Defining women's roles in a male-controlled organization proved easier said than done, however. Some Unión men put obstacles in the women's path and blocked their access to the governmental and IAF funds assigned to their projects. Official politicians also got involved and attempted to control the movement. With the help of two veteran advisors, the women still managed to form a regional network of their 15 community-based groups, which were known in official parlance as Unidades Agroindustriales de la Mujer (UAIMs).

Traditional male distrust of women's empowerment changed when the UELC leadership realized that it, too, could gain valuable political capital from the movement. The women's network of UAIMs won official representation to the assembly of Unión delegates, the first case ever in Mexico. As federal funds then became available, the UELC leadership, allied with

its traditional rivals in the CNC, managed to win over most of the UAIMs leadership from its original, more independent-minded organizers.

The difficulty of creating space for women's projects within the Unión highlights the constraints of an organization legally limited to "heads of households" with access to land. How can it—or should it—attempt to represent the interests of other groups, be they women, the landless, or young people? Autonomous community-based networks can be more attuned to the needs of these unrepresented groups, although it may be in their interest to work with or within larger and stronger regional organizations. In the case of the UELC, however, the politicization of the UAIMs led to an impasse in the progress of the economic projects themselves. The UELC's eventual incorporation of the UAIMs was a turning point because it involved expansion of membership and broadening of participation in response to grassroots demands. However, the future of the UAIMs depends on the women's capacity to maintain their autonomy in a context of shifting alliances.

## ELECTION TIME: PEASANTS FINALLY GET TREATED LIKE CITIZENS

The UELC's demands had always been primarily economic, and electoral politics were widely seen as corrupting. As Juan Franques put it when he was president: "We're independent because we don't get involved in politics. For the progress of the organization we should be united like one single man, united as peasants. Outside the door, people can follow the path they please, whatever party they want." But the rise of the nationalist opposition made the 1988 presidential race genuinely competitive in many regions of the country for the first time. Previously unseen differences between the UELC leadership and rank-and-file membership emerged.

The official candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, made substantive concessions to peasant demands in his platform, and personally visited the UELC to show his support for its approach to rural development. He even invited the president of the UELC to speak in a public campaign

event, proclaiming, "Let's hear what Nacho has to say." The UELC's leaders were greatly impressed, and moved to take advantage of this opportunity to leapfrog over their conservative local rivals in the CNC. The UELC's leaders supported Salinas's policy proposals, while many members sympathized with the principal opposition candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, son of the UELC's namesake, Lázaro Cárdenas, who as Mexico's president had redistributed most of the land in the region in the 1930s.

Both candidates made serious appeals to peasants as producers and as citizens, and the choice strained leadership-membership relations. Some were concerned that the leadership's support for Salinas implied a loss of autonomy for the organization. Others were convinced that real concessions to peasant organizations were in the offing. The UELC leadership appeared to have chosen its political strategy autonomously, without significant external intervention, but they had not extensively consulted the membership either.

Electoral politics strained the UELC, as they had in 1976. As a development organization, it was committed to defend its members' common interests, but leadership involvement in party politics tended to divide the membership. In most cases, the leadership tried to avoid conflict by ostensibly participating as individuals rather than UELC representatives, but they put more energy into consolidating alliances with politicians than into building a consensus among the membership.

Since the corn price movement, the new UELC leadership tended to centralize power. They were very cautious, for example, about sharing crucial financial information to prevent possible manipulation by political rivals. By election time, membership dissatisfaction was still too dispersed to be expressed through the delegate assembly, but members could make their views known through other channels, such as the ejido elections and UAIMs. The long-term impact of this turning point on the shifting balance of power between leaders and members remains uncertain. It is clear, however, that it reflects a swing away from responsiveness to member concerns.



## THE EBB AND FLOW OF MEMBERSHIP PARTICIPATION

Representative leaders have dominated most of the UELC's richly textured history. They were not ideologically motivated to encourage membership empowerment for its own sake, but their commitment to representative democracy and to meeting the felt needs of the membership, and their ongoing competition with the official peasant federation, made them care about member interests. When leaders strayed, members organized both formally and informally into intermediate and parallel groups to bring pressure for increased accountability. Yet accountability mechanisms did not operate automatically, and members acted unevenly when dissatisfied with leadership. These lags may be due in part to the decentralized and seasonal rhythms of agricultural life, but the inconsistent development of opportunities for active membership participation in the UELC's ongoing activities is a larger part of the explanation.

The UELC pressed its demands by using sophisticated combinations of mass direct action and lobbying through elite back channels and the UELC's "friends in high places," often in alliance with its counterparts in the Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas (UNORCA) network. The balance between the two strategies varied, however. The positive turning points were the repeated cycles of mass participation in campaigns for key membership demands. The

UELCC's founding fertilizer access movement, its redemocratization through the community food council, the self-managed housing project, the campaigns for higher crop prices, and the women's network all created or reinforced intermediate instances of participation outside the regular Unión and ejido assemblies. While the emphasis on elite lobbying that followed the 1988 presidential election provoked controversy, the Unión's vital internal political life continues.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since rural elites often centralize power at the regional level, rural membership organizations must also concentrate power regionally in order to become effective counterweights. Yet to remain internally democratic and to reduce vulnerability to external intervention, regional organizations must, at the same time, decentralize power internally. These twin imperatives pose a contradiction: How can a grassroots organization both centralize and decentralize power simultaneously?

This study found that while regional control over development activities is often economically necessary, it inherently creates a source of leadership power not directly linked to the membership assembly, thereby potentially distancing the leadership from its base. To carry out regional economic projects while minimizing loss of leadership accountability, then, community-level organizations must take conscious and deliberate steps to sustain their own autonomy

and membership participation. Because of these built-in tensions, it is not surprising that the balance of power between an organization's leadership and membership shifts back and forth over time, as it has in the UELC.

This study began with the premise that regionalizing grassroots development organizations puts democracy at risk, and searched for patterns of participation that created checks and balances to offset the "Iron Law of Oligarchy." It found that the ebb and flow of intermediate instances of participation, especially autonomous membership actions that horizontally link otherwise dispersed rural communities, helps to explain changing degrees of leadership accountability. The reasons for the ebb and flow of the intermediate instances of participation themselves remain to be more systematically studied. ♦

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*In this concluding panel, Unión members link arms to emphasize how popular participation is the glue that binds ejidos and communities together to ensure economic and social progress.*