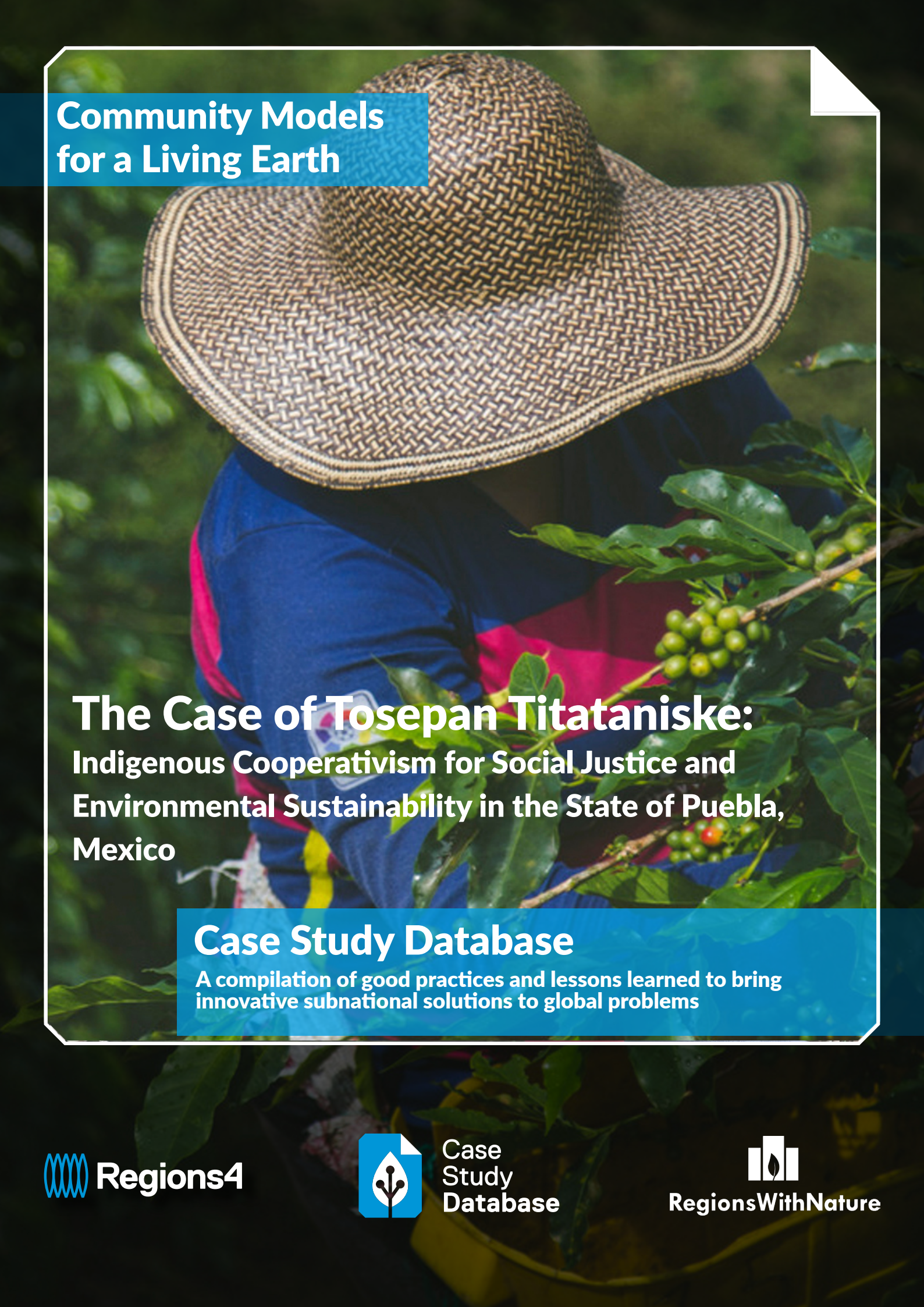




Community Models for a Living Earth

The Case of Tosepan Titataniske: Indigenous Cooperativism for Social Justice and Environmental Sustainability in the State of Puebla, Mexico

Case Study Database

A compilation of good practices and lessons learned to bring innovative subnational solutions to global problems

Introduction

Indigenous communities in Latin America often face economic, social, and environmental exploitation due to a lack of organization. As a result, people living in these communities may suffer from more precarious living standards.

Indigenous cooperatives such as Tosepan contribute significantly to improving the prospects of these communities. By organizing, they succeed in eluding or eradicating exploitative forces, promoting fair connections to services and markets outside the community. As these relationships strengthen, there are notable improvements in a number of areas. The community begins to develop its self-sufficiency and, in turn, reinvests in crucial aspects such as education, health care, and environmental protection.

Project Overview

Tosepan represents an exemplary model of self-management and solidarity that integrates economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. This organization is based on the unification and collective action of the producers of the Indigenous communities of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico.

Initially born out of the shared need among the region's Indigenous communities to eliminate the involvement of exploitative intermediaries in the trade of their products, Tosepan has evolved into a comprehensive cooperative model, encompassing a wide range of activities.

These include the production of organic coffee, allspice, cinnamon and melipona honey, as well as the provision of financial services through the Caja de Ahorros Tosepantomin, which offers advice and loans.

In addition, Tosepan manages a community radio station, promotes the advancement of health, tourism, education, and environmental protection, as well as clean energy. The organization is also committed to gender equality and human rights issues.

Key information

Location: Puebla, Mexico.

Areas of focus: Cooperativism, self-management, solidarity, fair trade, economic development.

Sustainable Development Goals addressed:

SDG 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13 and 15.

Objectives addressed by the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework:

Targets 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 21, 22 and 23.

Author

Regions4, in collaboration with Tosepan and with the support of CONGOPE

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Special collection

This case study is part of a special collection developed by Regions4 as part of its work on

Just Resilience

With the support of CONGOPE, its goal is to highlight Indigenous and community-based economic models that integrate sustainable practices, ancestral knowledge and collective organization while actively contributing to environmental conservation and territorial resilience.

These experiences were identified during the Breakthrough Workshop on Indigenous Economy and Just Resilience held in Napo (Ecuador) in January 2025.

The case studies include practical recommendations for subnational governments to recognise, strengthen, and collaborate with these models through their public policies, fostering a fairer, more inclusive transition in harmony with nature.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

TOSEPAN originated in 1977 in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico, when a group of indigenous Nahua and Totonac people traveled 140 kilometers on horseback to the municipality of Zacapoaxtla, where they could buy sugar at a fairer price by avoiding intermediaries. Later that year, producers from the Nahua Indigenous group began selling mamey, pepper, coffee, and basic basket products outside the region, avoiding intermediaries and tripling their prices. This process was repeated with the sale of coffee, and in 1980 the Tosepan Titataniske Regional Agricultural Cooperative Society was founded. “TosepanTitataniske” means “United We Will Overcome” in Nahuatl.

Tosepan began to alleviate many of the problems facing the region, including lack of access to food due to hoarding in the region, high levels of marginalization, and the exploitation of middlemen who had controlled the prices of agricultural products.

Over time, Tosepan has grown and evolved, and the group is considered the largest Indigenous cooperative in Mexico, comprised of 53,000 members in 39 municipalities in Puebla and Veracruz that participate in a wide range of cooperative efforts involving agriculture, finance, health, ecotourism, environmental conservation, human rights, and gender equality. The entire organization revolves around the principles of self-management, solidarity and sustainable development.



KEY ACTIVITIES AND PRACTICES

Structure and organization

Today, Tosepan Titataniske is made up of a dozen regional cooperatives and civil associations, whose number and name vary slightly from source to source. Each cooperative focuses on a specific goal or industry, while the TosepanTitataniske Regional Agricultural Cooperative Society oversees the overall direction of the collective:

- **Maseual Xicaualis SC**, which means “**Indigenous Force**” in Nahuatl, was founded in 1997 with the aim of collecting, processing and marketing the products of the region.
- **The Tosepantomin Savings and Credit Cooperative**, also known as the **Tosepantomin Savings Bank**, provides financial counseling, loans, and insurance in a way that is appropriate in the community.
- **The Kalteixpetaniloan Training Center** (“the house where the spirit opens” in Nahuatl) and TosepanKalnemachtiloan (“our school” in Nahuatl) were founded in 2001 and **serve as basic education centers**.
- **The TosepanKali Cooperative** (“our home” in Nahuatl) was founded in 2007 **in order to venture into the alternative tourism industry**.
- **The TosepanSiamej Cooperative** (“united women” in Nahuatl) **aims to promote community microenterprises made up of women**, and conducts gender-sensitive training.
- **The TosepanOjtasentekitini** (“United Bamboo Workers” in Nahuatl) **Cooperative specializes in bamboo construction**, with a focus on furniture and handicrafts.
- **The TosepanPajti Cooperative** (“Health for All” in Nahuatl) was established in 2009 **in direct response to members’ demands for accessible health care**.
- **The TosepanTitataniske Cooperative Society** is dedicated to the **commercialization of organic products**, sale of coffee plants, pepper, cinnamon, bocashi fertilizer, biol, and certification for organic producers.
- **Yeknemilis AC** (“dignified life” in Nahuatl) was formed in 2002 and **offers technical assistance and training services that are part of TosepanTitataniske as organic producers**.
- **TosepanMoliniaj** (“United in Movement” in Nahuatl), established in 2024, **is a women-led initiative that operates the Gasolinera del Bienestar**, a cooperative gas station in Cuetzalan, Puebla.
- **Finally, Radio TosepanLimaxtum AC** and the community radio, which began broadcasting in 2011, **developing both print and audiovisual media and Wiki Katat, the first virtual social and community Mobile Operator, provides mobile telephone and internet service throughout the national territory with roaming in the United States and Canada**.

Governance

Tosepan's governance is based on cooperative principles, direct democracy and strong community participation, combining Indigenous traditions with formal legal structures. Each of the constituent cooperatives is legally constituted, maintains its own Board of Directors, and maintains separate financial accounts. The headquarters of the Union is located in Cuetzalan, Puebla, and most of its members are Indigenous Nahuas and Totonacs. Membership **begins at the local level**: people who wish to join must apply through the community assembly of one of the 395 local cooperatives, ensuring grassroots participation and representation.

The highest authority within Tosepan is the General Assembly, where each member has one vote, embodying the principle of "one person, one vote." This General Assembly is held on the fourth Sunday of each month and is mainly focused on presenting and reviewing the reports of the cooperatives. **In addition, the boards of directors of the local cooperatives that make up the Regional Cooperative meet every month.** This regular and structured calendar ensures continuous dialogue and consensus-building on all aspects of cooperative life. In total, 495 assemblies are held in the territory every month, demonstrating the depth and regularity of organizational participation within Tosepan.

The governance structure also includes a Board of Directors (composed of a president, a secretary and a treasurer), a Supervisory Board and several commissions (such as Production and Education) to oversee different operational areas. **These boards involve representatives from each local cooperative, and a network of 60 community promoters and a five-member advisory body provide technical assistance and liaison between the administration and the communities.**

Tosepan's decentralized, multilevel governance – local assemblies that feed regional representation – supports both accountability and adaptability. The cooperative's collective decision-making model has fostered high levels of participation, especially among women, who now make up the majority of assembly attendees. **This participatory approach not only strengthens internal democracy, but also reinforces cooperative identity and a sense of security among members.** In addition, Tosepan's governance has extended its influence beyond economic activities, playing an important role in regional policy and social development, while remaining responsive to the changing needs of its diverse members.



Photo: Facebook | Tosepan Titataniske

Agricultural Practices and the Milpa System

TosepanTitataniske's work integrates the traditional practices and values of Indigenous communities. For example, they grow corn intercropped with beans, squash, chili peppers, and other edible plants; all free of genetic modification. This is an example of the Mesoamerican milpa system ("milli" means "sown field" and "pan" means "on" in Nahuatl).

Beyond being a preservation of Indigenous culture, the milpa system protects the biodiversity of the aforementioned crops and improves food security due to the complementarity of the crops: the plants receive light at different heights; beans fix nitrogen that other plants can use; Squash leaves provide shade, which reduces weeds and conserves moisture in the soil; The flowers of milpa plants attract insects that help reduce pest damage, and the increased volume of milpa crop roots increases the system's availability of water and nutrients.



Photo: Facebook | Tosepan Titataniske

Gender equality and women's empowerment

With regard to gender equality, the recognition of the same rights to women as men in the General Assembly — including the right to speak and vote — led to a marked increase in their participation, which ultimately resulted in women forming a majority of the attendance. **In addition, 64% of the members of local cooperatives are women.** Through the TosepanSiuamej Cooperative, the women operate tortilla shops, grocery stores, bakeries, and a workshop that makes cajetas, jams, and liquors, which has provided the women with financial resources, empowering them and creating a radical change in relationships within the community. The efforts of the Siuamej Cooperative are also intertwined with the preservation of Indigenous culture, as traditional cooking competitions are held aimed at renewing enthusiasm for traditional dishes and fostering appreciation for the culinary habits that kept the community's ancestors healthy.



Photos: La Coperacha – Fresh and Solidarity-Based Cooperative Information

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATION AND IMPACT

One of the most important achievements achieved through the organization of TosepanTitataniske was the approval of its ecological management plan “Ecological Land Use Management for the Sierra Norte de Puebla”. A series of studies and community consultations involving up to 5000 people designated areas for conservation, restoration, sustainable use and protection, including vital watersheds in the region. These designations exclude mining and most other megaprojects, and this was reinforced by a successful class action lawsuit in March 2015 to recognize and enforce the zoning plan, and the creation of a Territorial Defense Committee (the Masehual Altepetahpiani council), to monitor the activities of companies attempting to extract resources from the region. Tosepanhas claimed to have halted four hydroelectric projects and a multinational hypermarket.

The aforementioned protection of the biodiversity of the milpa system and the conservation and restoration of lands of the land use plan is only the beginning of the environmental benefits introduced by the Tosepan projects. It has engaged in reforestation of the area, used micrografting to accelerate the growth of fruit trees, leveraged water recycling methods to support sustainable housing projects, and deployed mud hives to encourage pollination.

An important recent development is the formal declaration of the Kowtahyolo Natural Protected Area (NPA) in Cuetzalan del Progreso. The proposal for this federally protected area was supported by a comprehensive Preliminary Justification Study (EPJ) and presented to the community through a series of twelve meetings, reflecting a highly participatory process. The NPA covers approximately 1,733 hectares – about 12.8% of the municipality’s surface area – and aims to preserve the region’s rich natural

resources, including temperate forests and areas of high biodiversity. This legal protection strengthens community resistance against megaprojects such as mining and hydroelectric dams, safeguarding both the ecological balance and the territorial rights of Indigenous peoples.

ecotourism is another pillar of Tosepan’s environmental strategy, mainly through the TosepanKali cooperative. Founded in 2004, it offers ecotourism experiences that immerse visitors, many of them from schools and universities, in the daily agricultural and conservation activities of local producers. The cooperative’s Alternative Tourism Program integrates environmental education, hands-on agroecological work, and guided tours, fostering a greater appreciation for local products and sustainable practices. Tosepan Kali’s infrastructure, which includes cottages, a hotel, and a spa, has been built with local and eco-friendly materials such as bamboo, adobe, and stone, and incorporates sustainable technologies such as rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment. The cooperative stands out for its gender balance and for providing employment to local youth, helping to reduce emigration and strengthen community ties.

Social learning is central to Tosepan Kali’s approach, as cooperative members continuously adapt and share knowledge about natural resource management and sustainability.

While the cooperative has made significant strides towards sustainable tourism, ongoing challenges and external pressures mean that the path to sustainability remains a dynamic process, and as of 2018, 90% of producers in TosepanTitataniske were considered conventional, meaning their farming practices were not certified organic.

SUSTAINABILITY AND CHALLENGES

The Tosepantomin Savings Bank has been the main source of financing for the cooperatives.

It brings sustainability to Tosear's broader effort by offering credit for agricultural production, housing, women's programs, and emergencies, and, as of 2018, had the lowest interest rate in the state of Puebla.

The traditional volunteer work practices of 'mano vuelta', 'tamakepalis' and 'faena' also help to sustain Tosepan.

As seen in the variety of cooperatives that make up Tosepan, diversification is a fundamental pillar of the modern version of the organization, and this is key to its sustainability. This means that the existence of the organization does not depend on the success of a single project, which is especially important today, given that the international context and market are becoming increasingly volatile.

This, however, does not mean that Tosepan is immune to the negative effects of markets, as the lack of equitable access is one of the main challenges facing the organization. Although they managed to cut the middlemen in the first decades of their creation, a new challenge has arisen by not being able to find international buyers for their packaged products; which means that they rely heavily on the export of raw materials, a much less lucrative commodity. In addition, the costs associated with exporting and organic certification are increasing for both Tosepan and its producers.

ASSOCIATIONS

The Cuetzalan Territorial Planning Committee (COTIC) has been one of Tosepán's key allies since it joined in 2010. It is a government-approved environmental vision and policy guide that helps sustain the small-scale economy preferred by the people of Cuetzalán. COTIC has acted as the main legal tool for Tosepanto defend itself against mining projects.

Certification companies such as the Mexican Certification of Ecological Products and Processes (CERTIMEX), affiliated with Organics International (IFOAM), have allowed Tosepanto export certified organic products internationally.

Communities in the region can be affected by earthquakes, and the University Center for Regional Disaster Prevention of the Autonomous University of Puebla, Integral Participation Pixka, and the United Nations Development Program have helped with the construction and training of the earthquake-resistant population.

TosepanTitataniske is also supported by the Tosepan Foundation, which helps with planning and resource mobilization.



Photos: La Coperacha – Fresh and Solidarity-Based Cooperative Information and Facebook | Tosepan Titataniske

Lessons learned

and the role of subnational governments

Subnational governments can learn from TosepanTitataniske's experience and the strategies initiated by the organization in order to build effective subnational public policies.

Implementing land-use zoning plans is one way that subnational governments can contribute to creating a similar dynamic in their own regions.

Market access for Indigenous communities also ensures that they can establish financial self-sufficiency. **Subnational governments can facilitate connections between Indigenous communities and key services and actors, such as organic certification companies, universities, legal services, and international importers, in order to strengthen the foundations of communities' economies.** This is particularly important to protect Indigenous producers from the massive and often volatile effects of the domestic or international market.

Similarly, **subnational governments can also connect Indigenous communities with international actors, ensuring that their voices are heard in the global conversation on biodiversity, climate change, and sustainability.**

Subnational governments can use financial or fiscal support mechanisms to promote local initiatives, but they should also foster community self-sufficiency, ensuring that these instruments do not become sources of dependency or increased vulnerability.

Finally, **subnational governments must consult with Indigenous communities to ensure that regional policies are compatible with their activities.**



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Regions4 (formerly known as nrg4SD) is a global network that exclusively represents regional governments (states, regions, and provinces) in UN processes, European Union initiatives, and global discussions on climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development. Regions4 was established in 2002 at the World Summit in Johannesburg and currently represents more than 40 members from 20 countries across 4 continents. Through advocacy, cooperation, and capacity building, Regions4 empowers regional governments to accelerate global action.

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