



RESPONDING TO MEXICO'S WATER CRISIS

THE PROBLEM: MEXICO DENIES WATER TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, ENDANGERING THEIR SURVIVAL



Indigenous people are Mexico's poorest.



For generations, indigenous people survived by farming with water from wells they dug.



UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT TOOK AWAY THEIR WATER...



...by providing huge volumes of water to industrial farms and mines, which have **drained the water supply 25-80 feet.**

...by putting meters on the wells and charging indigenous people up to **1,000x their daily income,** which they couldn't pay.



Indigenous wells and farms dried up.

17% of Mexico's water resources are now gone.

Crops failed, people went hungry.

24%

of Mexicans live in hunger.



THE OUTCOME: 2.1 MILLION INDIGENOUS MEXICANS REGAINED THEIR WATER RIGHTS

Flor y Canto, a grassroots network of indigenous farmers supported by AJWS, organized Oaxacans to fight back.

They mobilized

16 VILLAGES **80 LOCAL LEADERS**
26,000 INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

They stood up to the government through:



- Advocacy
- Litigation
- Training local residents to know and defend their rights

and

They used indigenous techniques to replenish their water and revive the land:

- Built 1,000 wells
- Planted 100,000 trees
- Collected & conserved water



They achieved



LANDMARK LEGAL VICTORY

Water rights upheld for 2.1 million indigenous people:

Get water for free
Developers must consult communities before using water

and

- Water supply rose 30-95 feet
- Fields & crops flourished again
- Income rose
- Poverty lessened



AJWS supports **68 organizations** in **11 countries** that defend the right to water.



American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to promote human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS defends civil and political rights; advances sexual health and rights; promotes land rights and climate justice; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by advocating for U.S. and international policies for justice and equality worldwide.

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GRANTEE PROFILE

CENTRO DE DERECHOS INDIGENAS FLOR Y CANTO (Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights)



Indigenous farmers win a landmark victory that ensures their survival in Oaxaca.

Indigenous people have lived in Oaxaca's Central Valleys for thousands of years, sustaining themselves in this drought-prone region using traditional farming practices. Until recently, the communities managed their own water. They lived sustainably, digging wells that tapped into natural aquifers, and in times of drought, conserving water until the wells refilled.

In 2006, Mexico's national water authority, CONAGUA, interfered with this delicate balance by restricting indigenous communities' use of water from the wells and overcharging them for it. The farmers couldn't afford to pay the government's high rates, and as a result, their crops suffered. Moreover, while local people's farms withered, they saw the government provide ample water to nearby industrial farms, tourist hotels and mines—all projects that stood to benefit more privileged sectors.

Location: Oaxaca

Website: www.cdiflorycanto.wordpress.com

Organizational budget: \$657,125

AJWS Funding History: \$287,055 since 2008
AJWS was Flor y Canto's first long-time donor.

EMPOWERING FARMERS TO STOP WATER THEFT AND PURSUE JUSTICE IN THE COURTS

Flor y Canto, an AJWS grantee that was helping the local indigenous farmers advocate for their water rights, intervened to sue CONAGUA—and in 2013, it won the case. The municipal tribunal ruled that the water commission must consult with the farmers and give them a say in how water resources are allocated. It was a landmark victory—the first time anyone had sued this powerful body, the first time CONAGUA

had been made accountable to follow the law on indigenous rights, and the first time nationwide that a governmental institution had recognized those rights.

The case hinged on the Mexican constitution's directive that a community has the right to give or withhold its consent to proposed projects that may affect the lands they own, occupy or use. With AJWS's support, the organization has not only held the government accountable to this law, but it has also trained hundreds of local people to know the law and stand up to their government. They formed what they called the Alliance of Agrarian and Municipal Authorities for the Defense and the Protection of Water to help them negotiate for their land and water rights in the future.

Unfortunately, Flor y Canto's victory came with a price: The organization received threats throughout the case and, in 2012, a community activist was murdered. But

the community held its ground, and Flor y Canto and the people are now negotiating the community's role in making decisions moving forward. Today, communities all over Mexico are reaching out to Flor y Canto for guidance about how they can bring similar lawsuits.

RESTORING THE BALANCE OF THE LAND THROUGH INNOVATIVE WATER CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES

While they pursued justice in the courts, Flor y Canto and the farmers worked to bring the local farms back to life. They restored ancestral methods of managing the natural water sources and created new techniques for combatting the effects of the dry season. They have strengthened natural aquifers and increased the water levels of communal wells, demonstrating how effectively indigenous people manage their own natural resources.

The people now refer to the indigenous farmers and Flor y Canto as the "sowers of water."



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- 1. AJWS works with Mexico's indigenous people—who are among the most vulnerable populations in the country.**
 - a. Indigenous communities such as the Náhuatl, Maya, and Zapotec are descendants of people who lived in Mexico before European colonists arrived. These groups have their own languages and distinctive cultural traditions that are still practiced today.
 - b. According to a 2015 report by the United Nations, 80.6 percent of Mexico's indigenous population lives in extreme poverty (earning less than \$1.25 per day).
 - c. AJWS works primarily with indigenous communities in the Southern state of Oaxaca—where 75 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty. More than half—56 percent—of Oaxacans identify as indigenous (that's 2,129,098 people).
- 2. For indigenous communities, farming is the key to survival:**
 - a. In Mexico, most indigenous communities support themselves by growing and selling crops and flowers.
 - b. The World Bank says 49 percent of indigenous income in Mexico is derived from agriculture.
- 3. Having indigenous farmers work the land is actually beneficial to the environment:**
 - a. Indigenous agriculture methods are better for the environment than industrial farming. Indigenous methods use up to 30 percent less fossil fuel and energy.
 - b. Indigenous farming methods also outperform chemical fertilizers in boosting food production. We saw evidence of this in projects conducted in 20 African countries, which demonstrated that indigenous methods doubled crop yields, on average.
- 4. Indigenous farms are being threatened because they are losing access to water:**
 - a. Indigenous farmers used to get all the water they needed from rain and wells they dug themselves.
 - b. But many of their wells have dried up recently, because the government has supported projects that use huge amounts of water—including mines, industrial farms and tourism.
 - c. As a result of these projects, water levels have dropped from 8 to 25 meters.
 - d. 17.1 percent of Mexico's renewable water resources have already been exhausted.
- 5. Additionally, the government has started to place meters on wells built by the local community and charge for water that used to be free.**
 - a. In Oaxaca, indigenous farmers were charged fees ranging from 200 pesos to 24,000 pesos (up to \$1200 USD)—which is almost 1,000 times their daily income.



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6. **Between water shortages and the sudden exorbitant cost of water, crops failed and the poverty of indigenous communities worsened.**
 - a. Farmers were unable to grow vegetables, so families had to buy lower-quality ones (grown using wastewater) from nearby communities.

7. **This led to hunger.**
 - a. In Oaxaca, one of every two households reports having trouble accessing enough food. Indigenous households are more likely to be food insecure than other rural lower-income populations.
 - b. In Mexico overall, 44.3 percent of the population suffers from some level of food insecurity.
 - c. To give you a sense of the scale of this problem, the World Bank estimates that Mexico loses over \$19 billion annually due to the effects of malnutrition on productivity.
 - d. The consequences of food insecurity have been documented extensively: It can cause poor health and developmental or behavioral problems and certain birth defects in children.
 - e. Reports from Oaxaca demonstrate that many farmers were forced to leave the area in search of work.

THE SOLUTION: 2.1 MILLION INDIGENOUS MEXICANS REGAINED THEIR WATER RIGHTS.

1. **AJWS has been working with indigenous activists to fight back and reclaim their water rights so the region can thrive again.** For example, AJWS provides support to Flor Y Canto (which means “flower and song” in Spanish), a grassroots network of indigenous farmers. Flor y Canto mobilized and trained about 26,000 indigenous community members in 16 villages to know and defend their rights.
 - a. Flor y Canto hosts workshops every Saturday for six-month periods to teach farmers their rights and train them to advocate for themselves.
 - b. Flor y Canto also conducts its own advocacy with the Mexican government and represents farmers in court.

2. **Thanks to their combined efforts, in 2013, Flor y Canto and the community secured a major landmark legal victory granting indigenous communities the right to control their water resources.**
 - i. This water system produces 80 percent of the total water consumed and used in agriculture in Oaxaca, supporting 2.1 million people.
 - ii. Now, developers consult communities before using water, and the water company can’t charge for use of local wells built by the indigenous communities.



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- iii. This is the first time indigenous farmers in Mexico and the Latin American region have ever been granted the right to be consulted about the use and administration of water.
 - iv. As a result of this legal victory, indigenous farmers are now recognized as key political actors in water policy and recognized by the government as managers of Oaxaca water.
- 3. Indigenous farmers are now working to replenish and protect their water source.**
- a. Between 2005 and 2010, Flor y Canto built 1,000 wells in 16 communities that now serve 26,245 people.
 - b. Flor y Canto has planted 100,000 trees, helping generate rain.
 - c. As the water supply has returned, water in local wells has increased from 30-95 feet.
- 4. With their access to water restored, indigenous communities are farming and making a living from agriculture again—and the land is flourishing.**
- a. Farmers have increased crop production.
 - b. Indigenous women have started selling flowers and vegetables again.
 - c. Migrants who left in search of jobs have returned to the community.
 - d. Income is rising.
 - e. Hunger has dropped.
- 5. AJWS supports 68 similar organizations in 11 countries that are working to defend the right to water:**
- | | | | |
|----------|------------------|-------------|------------------|
| India | 12 organizations | Sri Lanka | 6 organizations |
| Thailand | 3 organizations | Mexico | 9 organizations |
| Cambodia | 5 organizations | Guatemala | 6 organizations |
| Burma | 4 organizations | El Salvador | 11 organizations |
| Haiti | 6 organizations | Honduras | 3 organizations |
| Kenya | 3 organizations | | |

--- As social justice activist Bryan Stevenson said, *“The opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.”* The indigenous community of Oaxaca achieved justice in this case—a result that is yielding greater equality and prosperity for millions of people. ---



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Want to learn more about Floy y Canto?

The following articles feature Flor y Canto and other AJWS grantees defending water rights in Oaxaca. Several of these publications feature the same central story or character, but in different lengths and formats. Use the one that feels right for your audience.

- ***Mexico Country Profile*** (see photo essay on page 20)
https://ajws-americanjewishwo.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Mexico_Country_Profile_Web.pdf
- ***30 at 30*** (see brief profile of Bernardo Vasquez Sanchez, water rights activist in a community in the Flor y Canto network): <https://ajws.org/stories/bernardo-vasquez-sanchez/>
- ***AJWS Reports Magazine, May 2015*** (See photo essay on pages 14 and 15):
http://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ajws_reports_2013_REDUCED_SIZE.pdf

Want to learn more about Jewish perspectives on water rights?

- **Torah commentary about access to clean drinking water** (Parashat Vaera by Aviva Presser Aiden with introduction about Flor y Canto):
<https://ajws.org/dvar-tzedek/vaera-5776/>