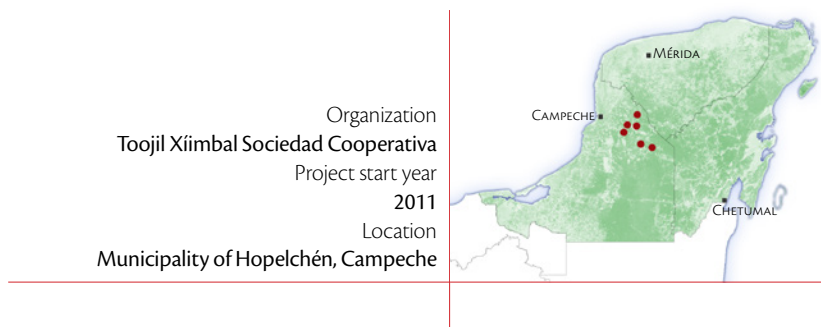




The family in the garden.

# SUSTAINABLE MAYAN MILPA



## INTRODUCTION

Toojil Xíimbal is a Mayan indigenous organization that was legally constituted as a cooperative in 2011. Since 2009 its members work on issues such as participatory planning, culture and identity, food sovereignty, integrated agroecological areas and natural resources, among others. Toojil Xíimbal means “*justice that walks*” in Mayan language, and that is why the organization emerged with a mission to strengthen their identity in a context that has displaced native seeds and original traditions.

The organization’s main objective is to transmit the traditional farmer’s knowledge to new generations, retrieve knowledge, reap-praise and re-apply. “But not everything new involves a threat,” say the members, “so through workshops and participatory processes we review the most useful of both worlds, what we learn from our grandparents and the innovations available today in order to promote sustainable agriculture”. In 2013, with support from TNC and under the Mexico REDD+ Alliance, Toojil Xíimbal initiated a project on sustainable Mayan Milpa, which applies agroecological practices to the millenary *milpa* tradition. Alongside this initiative, the most ambitious project of the organization is the creation of a rural school based on Hopelchén.



Family in demonstration plot in Suctuc.

## INITIAL SITUATION

For seven years, Toojil Xíimbal organizes a seeds festival along with nine communities: Xcalot Akal, Xkix, Sahcabchén San Juan Bautista, San Francisco Suctuc, Hopelchén, Dzibalchén, Iturbide, Crucero San Luis and Ich Ek. They prefer to talk about a festivity, not a fair, because it involves a non-commercial concept and a celebration of life through the seeds. Toojil Xíimbal members believe that it is very difficult to change the idea that the most important thing is money, downplaying the diversity and health of the family. In the *milpa* it is not possible to achieve the same economic profit than in a mechanized hectare, but it provides other important benefits in return, such as the elimination of chemicals that can negatively impact the health of farmers and the environment. When speaking of sustainable *milpa*, the organization promotes the protection of the polyculture system, as well as soil conservation practices to maintain or improve fertility. In this way, migratory farming could be eliminated, which consists of abandoning the plots every three to five years with the ensuing need to deforest new areas for cultivation, and people would then practice more sedentary farming.

They also considered that another way to rescue ancestral farming practices could be through a rural school. The school was planned to be finished in ten years, but during the first three years of planning it has already become a reality. For this purpose, Toojil Xíimbal got a terrain in Suctuc, near Hopelchén, with a history that reflects the reality they seek to change. Some 30 years ago this area was forested, but for some reason it was cut down and it was the scenery for mechanized agriculture. Once abandoned, the land was overrun with Johnson grass (*Sorghum halepense*) and nutsedge (*Cyperus* sp.): two very difficult exotic species to eradicate. Under these conditions, members of the Toojil Xíimbal started working in the land with agro-ecological principles, and the process of transformation has provided valuable lessons.

## KEY MOMENTS

Gradually more people were taking over the initiative of the seed festival, and Toojil Xíimbal helped organize it under the concept of a *fiesta de semillas*, or festivity of seeds. “When we started these festivals we had four corn varieties, and today we can already find nine varieties grown in the area”, says Madhavi Tello, administrative head of the cooperative. In the seventh seed festival, which was held in May 2014 and was attended by representatives of all the Yucatan Peninsula, the *ejido* of Dzibalchén took the organization of the event almost entirely. This has huge value, recognized the members of the cooperative, as it shows that communities are aware of the importance of recovering native seeds.

In addition to organizational issues in the communities, other areas of work addressed by the cooperative focus on vermicomposting and simple compost techniques, breeding of Mexican hairless pig, management and control of pests, bocashi preparation, keeping melipona bees, growing vegetables and Mayan *milpa*. It began as just training, but today it works in defined spaces in Hopelchén and Suctuc. In 2014, under the Mexico AMREDD+ Alliance, the project to develop a model of sustainable Mayan *milpa* begins, combining the traditional technique with some improved techniques; such as achieving a sedentary



Hibiscus.

*milpa* instead of a migrating one, elimination of burning and incorporation of organic fertilizers.

### LESSONS LEARNED

“We believe that having a non-profit organization is not a means to make a living, but a means for the life of the community, for people who are organizing themselves because they want to transform their reality,” says Madhavi. In that sense, the seeds festival was pivotal because it led to the organization of people; and most importantly after the festival people actually planted the varieties they received. Elizabeth Mena, community adviser for the cooperative, considers that the most important thing is that people themselves are convinced by the value of rescuing the Mayan *milpa* as a way to crop, as opposed to changing their farming methods as mere response to external incentives. This is a time consuming process because the producers themselves are discovering the advantages of not relying on technological packages, and people end up realizing that there is a benefit to the health of people and the land.

Doña Leticia Carmen Dzib, promoter in the communities, began to farm in the Suctuc terrain. There she grows peas, hibiscus, pepper, tomato, radish, coriander, Lima beans, among other



Mexican hairless pig.

things. “My husband, says Dona Leticia- plants on 30 hectares of mechanized *milpa*; but this year he experimented with 7 hectares without agrochemicals and had a good squash harvest. Moreover, he is already beginning to join in the cooperative farm, and even my son asks me to go to the farm to plant”. For Jose Trinidad (Mahatma), Toojil Xiimbal’s forestry technician, the major satisfaction of rescuing the *milpa* as a cultivation technique is the creation of a family work environment, where everyone is going to work because they want to, not because of money. “We may have an idea, says Mahatma, but the most important thing is to reach the communities and listen to what people want and feel, it is there where the best ideas arise” .

Genuine adoption of sustainable *milpa* practices could have a positive impact in the medium term to reduce deforestation locally. This is because the maintenance of soil fertility, along with increased productivity and reduced costs, make it unnecessary to abandon the plots and to incorporate new arable areas. Moving from a migrating agriculture to a sedentary scheme means that the presence of forest areas adjacent to the *milpa* would have one less threat to their survival; and a further step towards the sustainable management of these forests. This could be the way to guarantee the preservation of this millenary agricultural practices altogether.