

## Higher education and youth leadership in productive projects in Chiapas. UNICH and CISC case

### Educación superior y liderazgo de jóvenes en proyectos productivos de Chiapas. Caso UNICH y CISC

Danae Estrada Soto\*  
Minerva Yoimy Castañeda Seijas\*

#### Abstract

The purpose of the following article is to present a general overview of the conditions of education in Mexico and Chiapas, where the possibilities of productive projects for young people from indigenous populations who have graduated from higher education in the highlands of Chiapas are investigated. Emphasis will be placed on indigenous women with productive projects, since it is noted that there is even a triple marginalization for this segment of the population, due to the perspective of poverty, gender and belonging to a native people or community. It is worth mentioning that a case of success generated by the Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán A.C. (CISC) in collaboration with the Universidad

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\* Postdoctoral fellow-CONAHCYT

Intercultural University of Chiapas

[danae.conacyt@unich.edu.mx](mailto:danae.conacyt@unich.edu.mx)

Orcid: 0000-0003-2343-818X

[yoimi.seijas@unich.edu.mx](mailto:yoimi.seijas@unich.edu.mx)

\* Dr. Professor and researcher

Intercultural University of Chiapas,

[minerva.yoimy@unich.edu.mx](mailto:minerva.yoimy@unich.edu.mx)

orcid: 0000-0002-1466-1585

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Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH) will be taken, where graduates and students carried out productive projects with the purpose of strengthening the economy of vulnerable communities or their own communities of origin.

**Keywords:** Chiapas, education, Human Development, Interculturality culture

### **Resumen**

El siguiente artículo tiene como finalidad exponer un panorama general sobre las condiciones de educación en México y Chiapas, donde se investigan las posibilidades de proyectos productivos que tiene jóvenes de poblaciones indígenas egresadas y egresados de la educación superior de la zona Altos de Chiapas. Se pondrá énfasis en las mujeres indígenas con proyectos productivos, puesto que se advierte que existe hasta una triple marginación para este segmento de la población, por la perspectiva de la pobreza, del género y por pertenecer a un pueblo o comunidad originaria. Cabe destacar que se tomará un caso de éxito generado por el Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán A.C (CISC) en colaboración con la Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH) donde egresadas, egresados y comunidad estudiantil realizaron proyectos productivos con la finalidad de fortalecer la economía de comunidades vulnerables o de sus propias comunidades de origen.

**Palabras clave:** Chiapas, educación, Desarrollo Humano, Interculturalidad cultura

### **Introduction**

Education is an essential element for the development of people, it is undeniable that it is a factor that has an impact on the economic, political and social perspectives, and that is due to intellectual growth, but also to the capitalist system that most countries around the world have, where productivity is one of the main axes and to achieve greater economic capital one must have greater intellectual capital, which according to the indicators can only be achieved by obtaining the corresponding diplomas and/or certificates.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), those who are able to access higher education are reflected in better job opportunities and therefore in

higher incomes compared to those who have higher secondary education, according to data from OECD countries (2019).

For its part, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) through the National Survey on Access and Permanence in Education (ENAPE) in its 2022 edition supports the aforementioned and that it is located in the imaginary of the Mexican population.

73.0 % responded that they strongly agreed that the more schooling a person has, the greater the possibility of improving their standard of living; 68.0 % stated that they strongly agreed that people who continue studying have better job opportunities and 54.6 % said they strongly agreed that having more years of study helps people to make better life decisions (ENAPE, 2022, p. 14). (ENAPE, 2022, p. 14).

Through various levels of measurement we can observe quantitatively the status of certain issues such as health, housing or education, which provides an overview of the situation of any country. Through these indicators we now know that Mexico, compared to other countries, has one of the lowest rates of schooling and educational quality, and although various measurement parameters have been strongly questioned for not having elements that contextualize the characteristics of the countries, they also provide us with elements of analysis.

According to the results of the latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test conducted by the OECD, Mexico ranked 102nd out of 123 countries that participated in these tests, which evaluate important educational areas such as reading, writing, science and mathematics, among others.

According to INEGI (2020), the average level of schooling for the Mexican territory is 9.7 years of schooling for the population aged 15 years and older, which places the population of the national territory with only a high school education.

What also places the population in a status of very high vulnerability is illiteracy, which has not been eradicated, since at the national level 5 out of every 100 Mexican nationals cannot read and write, it is true that when interpreting the data it is observed that this number corresponds to people 60 years of age and older, where the largest number of illiterate people is concentrated is in the 75 years of age, however, this complex issue still prevails in the country.

However, the situation of people who wish to enter higher education becomes more complex because, although the levels of participation

have increased, it is not possible to have a high average of the population that reaches these levels.

Mexico has made significant progress in higher education attainment. The share of young adults (25-34 years old), who completed higher education has increased from 16% in 2008 to 23% in 2018, but still remains below the OECD average (44%). The substantial expansion of higher education has been accompanied by a diversification of institutions' missions, profiles and geographic coverage, and an expansion of distance learning. This has helped reduce socioeconomic inequalities in participation (OECD, 2019, p.2).

The following data shows a not at all encouraging panorama in the country for people who wish to obtain a postgraduate degree, since a very small portion of the population will be able to access a master's or doctorate degree; the possibilities are minimal and increasingly complex in this country with historical inequalities and such marked shortages.

Among 25-64 year-olds in Mexico, bachelor's degrees are the most common (18%), followed by master's degrees (2%), and short-cycle tertiary qualifications (1%). On average across OECD countries, bachelor's degrees are also the most common (19%), followed by master's degrees (14%) and short-cycle tertiary qualifications (7%). As in all OECD countries, only a small fraction of the population has a doctoral degree: in Mexico, the percentage is less than 1%. (OECD, 2022, p. 9).

The comparison with the average of the OECD countries is revealing; the comparison with the average of the OECD countries is linked to the undergraduate data, but there is a percentage difference of 12 points in the master's degree and in the case of the doctorate, less than 1 percent of the population obtains a doctorate degree in the country, which reflects the low levels of schooling in the general population, but the situation becomes more complex when it comes to people from indigenous peoples and communities.

## **Materials and methods**

Mexico is a multicultural country, from this perspective we could consider a place with great cultural richness because it concentrates a great variety of native peoples and communities that mostly continue preserving ancestral knowledge and languages, among

which prevail the Tseltal, Tsotsil, Mam, Tojolabal, Lacandon, among others.

Of the country's total population there are 23.2 million people who self-identify as indigenous, which according to INEGI (2022) represents 19 percent of the population aged three years and older, however, not all speak an indigenous language, being only approximately 7 thousand people, representing 6.1 percent of the population. We know that historically, opportunities have not been equal for these minority groups, and from their trenches they fight for equal access to health services, food security, biodiversity, recognition of their rights and, of course, education.

In Mexico, the population 15 years of age and older who speak an indigenous language had an average level of schooling of 6.2 grades (equivalent to completing primary school). This figure is lower than that of the non-indigenous language-speaking population aged 15 and over. The latter reported a level of 10 grades of schooling. It was also lower than the total population, which reported 9.7 grades. (INEGI, 2022, p.5).

Here we can analyze that the average levels of schooling for speakers of an indigenous language are well below the average for the population of Mexico, which makes us emphasize the importance of conducting research based on the most felt problems that this sector of society has, to contribute in a small part to the balance, to make visible and contribute to the processes of recognition in education and gender, which are two relevant elements for the consolidation of the entire population. It is a pending debt that the country has in terms of equity for the application of public policies for problems that continue to prevail, such as education, and to shorten the educational gap that exists in comparison with other countries in the world, but also within the Mexican territory itself.

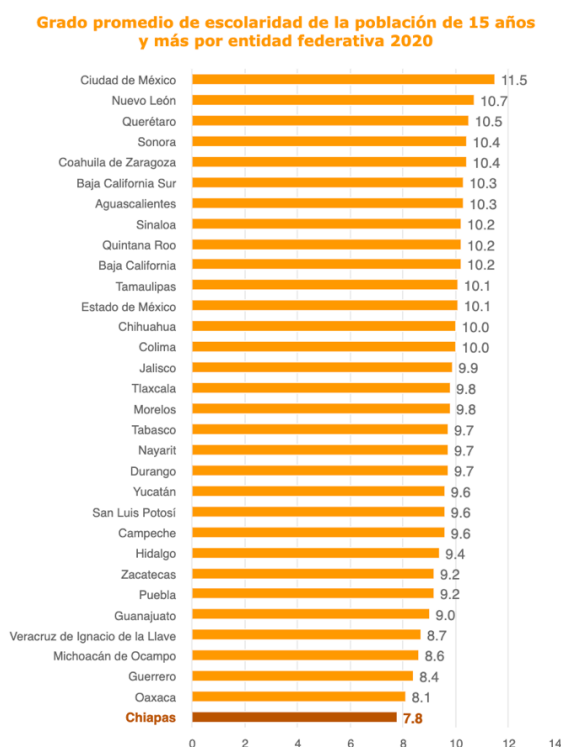
In Mexico, the illiteracy rate among the population 15 years of age and older who speak an indigenous language was 20.9 percent. This differs significantly from the situation of non-indigenous language speakers. In the latter, illiteracy was 3.6 percent, representing a gap of 17.3 percentage points (INEGI, 2022, p. 6).

It is considered necessary to address the issue because it is intended that by 2030 in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals set out in goal number 4 "Quality Education" where the importance of ensuring equal access to education and at all levels of education is raised.

## Results

As already mentioned, while the average schooling level for the national territory is 9.7, for Chiapas it is only 7.8 and for the indigenous populations it is 6.2, which places the majority of the population with only basic and high school education. In Mexico, there are large differences in the level of education between subnational regions. In 2020, the difference between the region with the highest percentage of people aged 25 to 64 with tertiary education (Mexico City, with 30%) and the one with the lowest percentage (Chiapas, with 12%) was 18 percentage points (OECD, 2022, p.2). (OECD, 2022, p.2). The data show a marked difference between states because for states in the center of the country such as Mexico City, the average level of schooling is 11.5 years, which shows that they reach a higher level of education, the same with states in the north such as Nuevo Leon with 10.7 years of schooling, in comparison with Chiapas, which is the state of the Mexican Republic with the least years of schooling, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Schooling of the population by federal entity



Source: INEGI, Population and Housing Census 2020.

The above shows stark inequalities in schooling levels, which indicate the complex panorama faced by the southern states of the country, specifically Chiapas, which is a multicultural state.

The states with the highest percentage of indigenous language speakers were: Oaxaca (31.2%), Chiapas (28.2%), Yucatan (23.7%) and Guerrero (15.5%). These four entities accounted for 50.5% of the total number of indigenous language speakers in the country (INEGI, 2022, p.3).

In terms of the percentage of speakers, half are concentrated in the south of the country, with Chiapas in second place in terms of speakers of an indigenous language, just below Oaxaca. Finally, it should be noted that 40% of the total population living in Chiapas identifies itself as indigenous.

Now let's disaggregate and recap, as if the data presented at the top of this article were not enough, one out of every 10 women living in Mexico is indigenous, which places them in an even greater situation of vulnerability.

Indigenous women are those who have the least opportunities and access to education, here we can talk about multiple factors, among which are the uses and customs, as well as the patriarchal system rooted in the indigenous communities in which they prefer men to access education by attributing to them the role of provider and assigning them the private spaces such as the home, without the possibility of having a salary for the requirement of their basic needs. At the national level, several indicators show the situation of inequality experienced by indigenous women compared to non-indigenous women. For example, of the total number of indigenous women, 25.7% are heads of household, a lower percentage compared to non-indigenous women (32.5%); in addition, 49.4% of indigenous women heads of household have an income less than or equal to the minimum wage, while 27.9% of non-indigenous women have the same income. Regarding the average number of children, indigenous women have 2.6 children and non-indigenous women have 2 children. (INMUJERES, 2022)

It is for this reason that we can argue that the data on education are more complicated, since they barely manage to finish primary school.

In terms of education, on average, indigenous women barely make it through primary school and into secondary school (6.9 years of

schooling), while non-indigenous women reach the first year of high school (9.9 years of schooling). (INMUJERES, 2022).

And in the case of monolingual women, the dropout rate or the possibility of not entering basic education is even greater, with very limited possibilities of continuing their education in middle, high school and higher education.

The difference in schooling was most notable among indigenous language-speaking women. On average, they had 5.8 grades of schooling, compared to 9.9 grades for non-indigenous language speakers (INEGI, 2022, p. 5).

Although it is also true that there are very important efforts to consolidate the educational perspective and the possibilities of a horizontal dialogue, proof of this is the creation and existence of Intercultural Baccalaureates and Universities, of which there are currently 11:

(i) Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (official creation decree of 2001) (ii) Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México (official creation decree of 2004)

(iii) Intercultural University of the State of Tabasco (official creation decree of 2005)

(iv) Intercultural University of Chiapas (Decree of official creation of 2005) (v) Intercultural University of the State of Puebla (Decree of official creation of 2006) (vi) Intercultural University of Veracruz (Program of the University of Veracruz founded in 2005)

(vii) Intercultural Mayan University of Quintana Roo (official creation decree of 2007).

(viii) Intercultural University of Guerrero (Official creation decree of 2007) (ix) Intercultural Indigenous University of Michoacán (Official creation decree of 2007)

(x) Intercultural University of San Luis Potosí (official creation decree of 2011) (xi) Intercultural University of the State of Hidalgo (official creation decree of 2012) (Enrique, 2022, p.58).

In Chiapas, the Intercultural University of Chiapas (UNICH) began its academic activities in 2005. Two years away from its 20th anniversary, it has managed to consolidate its undergraduate educational offerings and has gradually added postgraduate programs that are now recognized by CONAHCYT.

The Intercultural University of Chiapas (UNICH) is located in the highlands of Chiapas and is part of an initiative of the General

Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education (CGIEB) in conjunction with the Ministry of Public Education (SEP).

Its purpose is to prepare indigenous youth and adults to become active agents of transformation of their environment, through new educational opportunities that link accumulated knowledge and experience with the new development opportunities offered by today's society (Casillas and Santini, 2009, p. 22).

This institution houses mostly students from indigenous communities located in the communities surrounding San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and also has 4 Multidisciplinary Academic Units in the municipalities of Oxchuc, Margaritas, Yajalón and Salto de Agua. This University has seven academic programs: Agroecology, Language and Culture, Sustainable Development, Alternative Tourism, Intercultural Communication, Medical Surgeon and Intercultural Law. We can also mention the postgraduate programs, currently they have a Master's in Social and Solidarity Economy and a Master's in Intercultural Studies, both programs recognized by CONAHCYT.

This will allow not only to have spaces in 5 municipalities but also to be able to have an impact on different topics since the intention is to develop advocacy projects with indigenous students from different disciplines and multidisciplinary academic units, for the case of this article a project that was already implemented by civil society through the Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán A. C. (CISC) is addressed. C (CISC), currently derived from this project a follow up of the projects is made to observe if they have strengthened and contributed to raise the index of Human Development of the less favored populations with the productive projects implemented.

The Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán is a Civil Association whose vision is "To be a civil organization of reference for the local, state, national and international community in the development of research projects and systematization of action on issues of health, gender and society in the border region of the state of Chiapas" (Casillas and Santini, 2009, p.3).

As part of their functions, they carried out a project in conjunction with UNICH entitled "Intercultural linkage for local development: consolidating youth leadership with a territorial and multi-stakeholder approach in Chiapas". It should be noted that the

resources for this project were provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, where the general objective was to impact the well-being of diverse population groups in 9 municipalities of Chiapas, through the strengthening and consolidation of the intercultural university linkage program for local development, based on the collective action model of the UNICH youth, on dialogue and cooperation with the populations and on the accompaniment of faculty and social organizations. (CISC, 2022, p.2).

The projects they implemented were led, coordinated and implemented by youth collectives, and CISC was given the task of linking these productive projects with local actors and civil society organizations, the project began in 2019 and concluded in 2022.

There were 32 youth collectives made up of UNICH students and graduates, however, 22 collectives completed their projects with a total of 52 participants, 28 women and 26 men, broken down by gender, working in 15 municipalities in Chiapas, including: Chalchihuitán, San Juan Cancuc, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, San Juan Chamula, Amatenango del Valle, Zinacantán, Ocosingo, Yajalón, Osumacinta, Oxchuc, Chanal, San Andrés Larráinzar, Las Margaritas, Maravilla Tenejapa, Huixtán.

These projects focused on 4 areas:

1.- Cultural: with the rescue of the native Tseltal language and promotion of textile handicrafts.

Productive (Economic reactivation). Nurseries, mushroom modules, backyard poultry, community gardens, MIAF system.

Environmental. Soil rescue, biofertilizers and bioinsecticides, water catchment systems.

Tourism. Care and preservation of species.

With this successful project we can see the relevance of the generation of educational tools proposed by UNICH, with the linkage of society, because these two factors as we have described are important for social development and that can raise the Human Development Indexes.

This type of project seeks to influence the welfare of various social sectors in the state of Chiapas, through intercultural university linkages with local actors and civil society organizations. The critical route followed for the development of the projects was as follows: training (a diploma course was given: "Tools for youth leadership and social action" for design knowledge), project design (a call for

proposals for social impact based on local community problems was published), implementation (youth projects were implemented with support in administrative processes, design of materials and systematization of key actions) and project follow-up and results (training and advice).

The following 6 youth projects for local development that were carried out in the 2021 call for proposals will be presented below:

**Table 1.** *Productive projects of the 2021 Call for Proposals*

Project	Target	Members	Beneficiary
<b>Hass avocado plantation in areas with slopes using the agroecological approach.</b>	Create a strategy for planting Hass avocado trees with an agroecological approach in areas with steep slopes.	-Marcos López Jiménez  -Luis Enrique López Jiménez  -Mateo Encinos Méndez	10 Tseltal producers, 6 men and 4 women from the community of Piedra Escrita, Oxchu, participated in the project.
<b>Implementation of integrated demonstration orchards based on food processing.</b>	Revalue and diversify the integral orchards for agro-industrial purposes to contribute to the food self-sufficiency of families in the community of El Pozo, San Juan Cancuc.	-Marcos Cruz -Leopoldo Hernández López -Diego Pérez	We worked with 26 Tseltal producers, 14 men and 12 women from the community of El Pozo, San Juan Cancuc.
<b>Lumil-Chab' (Land of bees). Management and production of honey bees.</b>	Contribute to the generation of new sources of economic income through the productive management of Italian bees ( <i>Apis mellifera ligustica</i> ) in the town of Tierra y Libertad,	-Silvia Díaz Díaz -María Irene Méndez Mendoza -Francisco Javier Díaz Díaz	In this project we worked with 6 producers, 5 men and 1 woman from the community: Tierra y Libertad Municipality: Yajalón.

	municipality of Yajalón, Chiapas.		
<b>Integrated management of backyard poultry for family food self-sufficiency in the community of Patyalemton Chamula, Chiapas.</b>	Promote family food self-sufficiency through an integrated farm in the community of Patyalemton Chamula, Chiapas.	-Guadalupe Hernández Hernández  -Teofilo Hernández Hernández  -Juan Gabriel Hernández Hernández	This project worked with 15 families, including 15 women producers and 10 men producers, from the community of Patyalemton, Chamula, Chiapas.
<b>Puppets as a pedagogical tool for teaching nouns in the Tseltal language in Piedra Escrita, in the municipality of Oxchuc, Chiapas.</b>	To generate a pedagogical proposal by means of puppets for the teaching of the Tseltal language, promoting the valuation and use of its native language in the socio-cultural environment.	-Hortensia Gómez Sánchez  -Juan Pablo Gómez Sánchez  -Araceli Gómez Sánchez	In this project we worked with 28 children, 13 boys and 15 girls, in the town of Piedra Escrita, Oxchuc, Chiapas.
<b>Let's take care of what is ours</b>	Contribute to food sovereignty through the design of production systems based on MIAF in family plots and gardens in the Zacualpa Ecatepec community.	-Jesús Adrián González Esquinca  -Carmen Lucía Judith Navarro Bermudez	We worked with 10 producers in the community of Zacualpa Ecatepec.

Source: own elaboration with CISC data

The 9 youth projects for local development that were carried out in the 2022 call for proposals are the following:

**Table 2.** *Productive projects of the 2022 call for proposals*

Project	Target	members	Beneficiary
Strengthening of human resources to provide quality ecotourism services that contribute to sustainable local development in the UMA Cocodrilaro El Boquerón, Osumacinta, Chiapas.	Improve infrastructure and human resources work in the UMA Cocodrilaro "El Boquerón" in Osumacinta, Chiapas to generate sustainable local development.	-Francisco Javier García Herrera,  -Daniela Yuridia Sánchez Méndez.	Eight UMA partners participated.
The chicken yard and the flowers.	Contribute to improving the economy of families through an integrated backyard poultry management model in the Nuevo Villa Flores Ejido in the municipality of Maravilla Tenejapa.	-Mateo Vázquez Pérez,  -Amalia Morales Velázquez.	20 people from the community participated in the project: men, women and youth.
Mitigation of water scarcity in domestic use with rainwater harvesting systems in the community of Vista Hermosa el Carrizal (Grande).	Improve water supply for domestic use in 12 families in the community of Vista Hermosa el Carrizal (Grande), Municipality of San Cristobal Las Casas. Through the implementation of a rainwater harvesting and storage system.	-Edgar Gutiérrez Gómez,  -Luciana Geraldine Girón Méndez.	The program directly benefited 72 people, men and women.

Strawberry production in the community of El Carmen.	Improve the quality of life of families through a productive process of strawberries with agroecological techniques in the community of El Carmen, municipality of San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas.	-María Angélica Gómez Hernández,  -Suleima Vianey López Urbina,  -Alejandro Gómez Hernández.	Twenty producers from the community participated.
Food Sovereignty, Mushroom Production in Chalchihuitán, Chiapas.	Contribute to the strengthening of food sovereignty through the implementation of a mushroom production module. In the community of Balunaco, municipality of Chalchihuitán.	-Juan Gilberto Hernández Hernández,  -Ali García Espinosa,  -José Manuel Sánchez Encinos.	Twenty-one people participated: 12 women and 9 men.
Strategies for strengthening the speaking and writing of the Tzeltal language.	Promote the rescue of the Tzeltal language, through the awareness of its value as a symbol of cultural identity and connection with the world and literature, in the community of Providencia, municipality of Oxchuc.	-Javier Rodríguez Sántiz,  -Juan Alberto Rodríguez Sántiz	16 primary school children participated in the event
Construction of a community apiary with an environmental and productive approach.	Generate a new source of economic income through beekeeping and increased pollination of	-Marcelino López Díaz,  -Yeseña Gómez Encinos.	Five families participated, made up of men and women.

	crops in the community of Nazareth, municipality of Ocosingo, Chiapas.		
Sustainable soil management and home gardens.	Contribute to recover soil quality for agricultural productivity in Navenchauc, Zinacantán.	-Lila Pensativa Hurtado Alcántara,  -Celeste del Carmen Gómez Díaz.	There were 18 participants (7 men and 11 women).
Backyard gardens.	Promote food sovereignty of nutritious and fresh food for self-consumption and/or sale, in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way, with women from the Pie de Cerro neighborhood, municipality of Amatenango del Valle.	-Mercedes del Carmen Díaz,  -Esmeralda del Refugio Gómez Gómez,  -Carlos Luis Velasco Gómez.	Four Tzeltal women farmers, with few employment opportunities, participated.

Source: own elaboration with CISC data

## Discussion

It should be noted that what is presented in this article is a general overview from the perspective of education and gender in contexts of high vulnerability, putting education as a primary axis as a factor of development and anchoring with social aspects, thus describing some of the data and results obtained in this successful research project between these two instances which shows an important work of organized civil society in this case the CISC with Higher Education Institutions, UNICH works and performs its functions

from a strategic perspective to achieve the strengthening of education, where the work is considered horizontally with society and to achieve the income and access of young people to a better quality of life.

The progress presented here allows us to have elements of contextualization of the postdoctoral project that is currently underway. The information presented in this article allows us to see the panorama and importance of generating spaces for educational strengthening that allow us to consolidate the less favored communities of our entity. The project still continues, and we will work in a next phase where we will follow up with the women who were part of the teams and carried out projects with CISC. The idea of working with students and graduates is based on the importance that the women of the communities themselves contribute through the knowledge acquired in the classroom to the vulnerable communities of the Highlands of Chiapas or their own communities of origin, because the importance of getting involved as a society and contribute to the human development of the communities through joint work.

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