The Power of Wellbeing Discourses among Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People in Mexico

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Abstract This article focuses on local perceptions of wellbeing, their underlying social and power relations and the resulting cultural resistance by Rarámuri indigenous people in the Tarahumara region, Mexico. It is based on findings from doctoral research that argues that understandings of wellbeing must be analysed in conjunction with its sociocultural and political context and in relation to ethnic differences. In this sense, the article presents evidence that shows how Rarámuri people hold discursive understandings of wellbeing which evoke differentiated ways of living compared to those accounts described both in mainstream development thinking and those which occur in Mexico's wider society. Similarly, the article considers the value of ethnography, semi-structured interviews and participant observation as a tool in documenting notions of wellbeing and what Rarámuri people value, as well as exploring reflections, fieldwork experiences, and methodological challenges encountered while doing fieldwork research.

1 Introduction

This article looks at the link between ethnicity, wellbeing and power relations among Rarámuri indigenous people and the *mestizo* non-indigenous people in the Tarahumara mountain range in northern Mexico.[1] On the one hand, it examines the interface of these broad topics in order to better understand the way Rarámuri notions of wellbeing are being essentialised in a contest with the mainstream political and cultural economy. Specifically, the article examines how particular forms of inter-ethnic power relations have developed in the light of Rarámuri perceptions of what is important (i.e. what creates wellbeing). On the other, the article reflects on methodological challenges to document local perceptions and notions of wellbeing, and experiences during fieldwork in the Rarámuri localities studied.

This topic is important because it is a widely held view that indigenous people in Mexico have historically been subjected to subordinate positions *vis-à-vis* the dominant non-indigenous population (Bonfil-Batalla 2006; Cimadamore, Eversole and McNeish 2005; Esteva 2001; Hall and Patrinos 2006, 2011; UN 2009; Stavenhagen

1988; Villoro 1998; Warman 2003). Despite the recognition of historical and political exclusion, however, most studies have neglected the role power relations play in shaping the livelihoods and ways of living that are available in predominantly indigenous-occupied areas. There are a few studies that represent exceptions to this tendency, which emphasise power inequality and its effects on indigenous peoples' and peasants' livelihoods via the adoption of neoliberal policies (Arteaga and Brachet-Marquez 2011; Hewitt 1984; Varese 1996; Lee Peluso and Lund 2011). These issues have not yet been critically addressed, however, with questions remaining as to how inter-ethnic power relations contribute at the micro level to the creation and persistence of the power asymmetries that affect indigenous groups' self-determination, along with the implications of these asymmetries on local priorities and notions of wellbeing.

By exploring the case of the Rarámuri indigenous people in northern Mexico, the article explores how local (emic) understandings of wellbeing are framed by normative discourses that help define aspirations and wants, and which are maintained by forms of livelihoods and

ways of living. It argues for a need to coherently explore unequal social, economic and political relations and how they intersect with wellbeing notions and discourses of how to achieve 'the good life' in a specific context. By showing differentiated ways to conceive and achieve livelihoods, aspirations and ways to relate with nature expressed in living-well discourses, these discourses constitute, in the terms of Nancy Fraser (1992) the struggle between mainstream (non-indigenous) and subaltern (indigenous) understandings of wellbeing as two oppositional forces. Thus, by considering 'wellbeing not as a settled state but a field of struggle' (Jackson 2011) and that wellbeing has an objective, subjective and relational dimension constituted through social interaction and cultural meanings (White and Pettit 2004), I conclude that some livelihoods and ways of living, namely those of the non-indigenous, better fit a mainstream discourse of development than others, such as those portrayed by the Rarámuri indigenous people. These indigenous accounts, in turn, appeal to essentialised and ideal understandings of wellbeing based on the perpetuation of cultural practices that stress differences from the rest of mainstream society in order to secure their cultural survival.

In this sense, the article considers the value of ethnography as a tool in documenting notions of wellbeing and what Rarámuri people value; however, it also shows the methodological challenges faced during fieldwork in terms of documenting narratives, ethnographic accounts, and exploring how social relations play a fundamental role in the construction and perception of wellbeing.

The structure of the article is as follows. Following this introduction, Section 2 briefly presents the background and research aims of the project. Section 3 presents reflections, methodological challenges and fieldwork experiences faced while undertaking ethnographic research in the Tarahumara region. Section 4 explores two main dimensions identified by Rarámuri informants as crucial elements needed to live well in their own terms: (a) an ability to undertake subsistence agriculture, and (b) an enjoyment of a strong sense of community based on a network of solidarity and cooperation. Finally, Section 5 concludes that empirical findings suggest how a particular form of inter-ethnic power relations

has developed in light of Rarámuri perceptions of what is important in terms of dimensions associated with wellbeing.

2 Background and research aims

2.1 The Tarahumara region

The Tarahumara region is located in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua and in parts of the states of Sonora, Durango and Sinaloa. With an approximate area of 60,000 square kilometres, this region was chosen as an adequate area to conduct this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Rarámuri people, est. pop. 80,897 (INEGI 2010), have been identified as one of the groups suffering the lowest levels of Human Development and inter-ethnic disparity nationwide in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), and the indigenous region with the largest disparity of HDI comparing the indigenous and non-indigenous population (UNDP/CDI 2006),[2] while at the same time the region has an intrinsic profitable interest for national and global economic actors due to its characteristic biological diversity and rich natural resources. The biology and topography of the region consist of a system of deep subtropical canyons dominated by tropical dry forest (Bye 1994), alternating with high mountains up to 3,300 metres above sea level where around 15 per cent of Mexico's national forest surface lies (Perez-Cirera and Lovett 2006). This natural diversity has attracted national and global investments to develop the Tarahumara region as a main tourist destination since the 1980s. An example of this is the large-scale Copper Canyon Tourist Project that includes international resorts, cable cars crossing the canyons, and golf courts creating a rush for land acquisition by local elites, and national and global private entrepreneurs.

At the same time, conifer-oak forests are abundant on the highlands of the mountain region. Consequently, the promotion of land reforms that permitted the collective extraction of timber resources through the *ejidos*,[3]or communal land holdings, is one example of the investments that have shaped the recent history of the Tarahumara region. Indigenous and non-indigenous people take part in *ejidos* as members; however, the institutional arrangements within the *ejido* structure itself has led to concentration of power in a few hands that more often than not benefit *mestizo* over the indigenous people.

Moreover, the Tarahumara region has been a known place for mining activity since the nineteenth century, being now one of the main producer states in Mexico. At present, this globalised economic industry is producing new patrons of investments, driven by new technologies used to discover crucial reserves that feature on the world's most influential stock exchanges (Sariego 2008).

These economic investments that align with the mainstream development discourse have created contested scenarios that clash with traditional livelihoods and ways of living related to self-subsistence agriculture and cooperation practices within the indigenous group. As a result, ethno-political tension has been increasing in the region, as land conflicts make the Tarahumara region contested, not only in terms of who controls and benefits from the natural resources, but also as a space that challenges core assumptions of mainstream development and wellbeing itself (*ibid.*). Although the non-indigenous population are also impacted by these investments and contested scenarios, I argue that the Rarámuri people tend to historically suffer greater disadvantage in terms of: levels of participation in economic and political policies that promote their aspirations and collective aims; and capacity to flag their ethnic and political demands in the national arena. Similarly, the *mestizo* livelihoods, and the way of life associated to a larger extent with commoditisation of life due to the dominant society and market economy, have greater capacity to cope with and respond to economic and environmental shocks. They benefit from resources and opportunities in more effective ways than those Rarámuri who choose to follow a way of life that draws heavily on maintaining subsistence agriculture and collective practices over individual competition and material accumulation.

2.2 Ethnicity in the region

The Rarámuri, as a group, have a distinctive sociopolitical organisation, cultural patterns and historic background when compared to the *mestizo* population. The Rarámuri livelihoods are based on diverse subsistence and economic activities that have been shaped through a history of inter-ethnic relations and jealously guarded self-determination. There is a distinctive settlement pattern that marks

Rarámuri localities; the majority live in scattered patterns, hence 52 per cent of the total Rarámuri population of the Tarahumara region live in *rancherias* or dispersed hamlets of less than 100 people (Pintado 2004). The majority of Rarámuri engage in subsistence agriculture, where each family works on small plots of land that are collectively shared under the figure of the *ejido*. The main crops are maize, beans, squash, and potatoes, although other vegetables are also grown. Small-scale livestock animals, such as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats are also important assets for these households. Additionally, livelihoods are complemented by occasional participation in a variety of low-paid seasonal jobs – such as in commerce, tourism, forestry and mining – and in the illicit cultivation of *amapola* (poppy) and marijuana. This participation in the market economy, largely dominated by *mestizos*, accounts for the largest share of 'off-farm' income activities for the Rarámuri. Additionally, when available, both Rarámuri and non-indigenous or *mestizo* benefit from a combination of social protection programmes which are mainly government-led income transfers, such as Oportunidades and Procampo.[4]

The *mestizo* population tend to develop more market-based activities in larger urban and semi-urban towns such as commerce, services, tourism, forestry and mining. Households also tend to benefit from economic diversification within market activities to broaden their sources of income, as well as opportunities to protect their livelihoods (Hard and Merril 1992). Larger towns within the Tarahumara region have a clear and distinctive economic orientation towards services and commerce administered by *mestizo* families. In general terms, it can be said that within the *mestizo* population economic stratification is quite evident as some families have greater ties with economic or political activities than others.

The non-indigenous political system of the Tarahumara region is dominated by patronage relations. For instance, most if not all of the 17 municipalities that compose the Tarahumara region are controlled by a few *mestizo* families. In some cases, evident political and economic groups – some based on kinship – operate as locally powerful elites that control the municipal governments and local–national political

relations within the region (Ortega 2010). These elites also have a command over tourism and forestry projects introduced by international corporations and foreign investors, materially benefiting from such projects at the expense of the excluded majority local Rarámuri population.[5] Additionally, the non-indigenous political economy of the region contrasts with and threatens the traditional Rarámuri cultural-political and economic world view as it is able to take and control land and investments using particular forms of political and economic power.

2.2.1 *Laguna de Aboreachi and Aboreachi*

The main research site was done in two sets of localities: first, Laguna de Aboreachi with a mainly *mestizo* population (315); and the second locality, Aboreachi with a Rarámuri population (120). Both are in the Guachochi municipality which has the larger concentration of indigenous people and is one of the most disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic indicators (INEGI 2010; UNDP/CDI 2006).

Laguna de Aboreachi, the first locality, is located at the side of the main paved road connecting the touristic town of Creel and the commerce-oriented town of Guachochi, capital of the municipality of the same name. Laguna de Aboreachi, the dominantly *mestizo* locality, is located nearly 50 kilometres from the town of Guachochi. The region is surrounded by pine and oak forest. The *mestizos* of Laguna sustain their livelihoods predominantly by small businesses such as grocery stores, hardware stores, and mechanical garages. These survive, in part thanks to the visitors that cross the region via the road. Most businesses are run by family members in extensions of their own houses giving a distinctive presence to larger towns. Additionally, a common economic strategy is to diversify income sources: they complement self-employed business with cattle growing or selling, renting land to third parties, or engaging in working class jobs as drivers, builders, or carpenters. Most *mestizo* families are members of the *ejido*, which means that they participate in the collective decisions of forestry resources management and benefit from the income shares represented by any timber sales of *ejidos*. Moreover, all households receive benefits from Oportunidades and Procampo social protection programmes. The locality has an elementary, secondary and a small high school, a Catholic and Protestant church, one small clinic, and the *ejido's* sawmill. Bricks, blocks and cement are the common construction materials. Among the frequent furniture and household appliances are electric kitchen appliances, decorations, at least one TV, telephone, sofas, and they benefit from electric, water and sewerage services. Almost all *mestizo* households have at least one car or pick-up truck. This locality acts as the administrative and political centre of the *ejido*.

Aboreachi, the second locality, is located towards the west from the town of Laguna. It is also surrounded by mountains covered with pine and oak forest. A rural road passing three smaller Rarámuri localities connects Laguna and Aboreachi, a drive of 45–60 minutes. The condition of the road and journey duration depends greatly on the ever changing weather as during the rainy season, the sudden flow and growth of streams that cross it makes it difficult to transit and sometimes conditions are such that is virtually impossible to move along the road. An additional walking trail frequently used by Rarámuri people is used as an alternative, representing approximately a two-hour journey. If Laguna has semi-urban scenery, Aboreachi definitely has a distinctive rural setting; the roads are not paved, and there is neither running water, nor sewerage or electricity services.

Topographic and natural landmarks, such as a rocky mountain that overlooks the west of the locality, are the places of ancient myths, and the locations of old burials that still show human habitation, with some remains of historic and cultural importance for the Rarámuri people. Dirt roads and walking paths meander through growing plots connecting the scattered wood-built houses where the Rarámuri families live. The houses usually consist of two rooms, one where food is prepared in adapted wood stoves, and the other where timber frames and blankets are used as beds. Cattle and horses and other farm animals usually run free through the terrain. Economic participation in low-paid jobs or seasonal migration complements the livelihoods of the Rarámuri. This sporadic participation in the labour market is typically used as an economic coping strategy to compensate for a poor harvest or sudden economic debt due to, for instance, the need to seek medical attention.

3 Research techniques and reflections on information gathering

The article draws from empirical findings during fieldwork undergone in the Tarahumara region from January to December in 2010 as part of my PhD thesis. The methods used to obtain information during the fieldwork included ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and surveys. As a way to complement the ethnographic research, I applied interviews and surveys to 30 self-identified Rarámuri and 30 *mestizo* inhabitants of the selected localities. Secondary sources of information ranged from a variety of government documents, research projects, organisations' reports, statistical and numerical data sheets, academic studies, dissertations, journal articles, books, etc. Additionally, archival research related to two historic collections complemented the above research methods in order to incorporate a synchronic perspective wherever possible.[6]

With regard to the research methods used during fieldwork I was largely inspired by Stephen Gudeman and Albeto Rivera's work of *Conversations in Colombia* (1990), a text which is concerned with the domestic economy in daily life in order to understand social process and dynamics from a local perspective. Inspired by these authors, I aimed to build up a conversational community with informants not only to obtain information from them, but also as a way to verify and validate sources of information. This was done to try to prevent the usual asymmetries that occur in the subject/object relationships during fieldwork research (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991).

This approach was used, I argue, because in order to get good quality information I needed to live among the Rarámuri people, so as to not just limit my relationship to questionnaires and surveys which would limit the relationship with the people only to informants. Rather, I sought to engage with them wherever possible in their everyday activities and with ideas produced within that context. Also, other cultural factors were taken into consideration to obtain information through a variety of techniques; for instance, I learned that asking questions one after the other directly and persistently is not considered polite among the Rarámuri people.[7] Later, I used a data analysis approach influenced by constructivist grounded theory to build up concepts and arguments based on the elements and emic categories that the people in the Sierra Tarahumara themselves considered to be important, at the same time as relating them to key concepts identified from the literature, while trying to practise reflexivity and pay attention to my own positionality. The combination of empirical and grounded facts with bibliographical accounts provides robustness to the claims presented.

I am a Mexican anthropologist who has worked in the Tarahumara region in diverse applied and academic activities over the last decade. I have conducted fieldwork research in several localities before starting my PhD at the Institute of Development Studies. I sought to learn from my past research experience, and for this reason drew on the importance of an approach which consisted of doing extensive field research by living in the studied communities. One of the main reflections I drew from previous field experience was the need to build a relationship of trust between the informants and me. This implies being aware of my role as a 'foreign element' in the social scene of these localities. For instance, for me, fieldwork implied being prepared not only in the sense of being aware of my presence as an outsider, but also being attentive to the way I approached the community. In doing this, I had to have the ability to participate in community events by having a disposition and personal and physical aptitudes that would allow me to gather information and make sense of it by introducing myself in the social setting. Many important Rarámuri social gatherings centre on collective help for physically demanding household jobs such as the erection of a fence or ploughing or planting a field. The hosts repay the helpers with a highly sought after drink made of fermented maize called *teswuino*. These *teswuino* gatherings are deeply embedded in the groups' culture as they constitute an important part of social networks of cooperation consisting of family members, neighbours and close friends. Reciprocity is important in the scarce and vulnerable environment of the Tarahumara region.

The hosting household carefully invites those family members and friends that will form part of their traditional welfare system (Kennedy 1963, 1978; Saucedo 2003).[8] The beverage is also intrinsically related to ceremonial practices used to perpetuate the farming cycle and the sense of

earning the right to drink it by working on farming and helping others (Urteaga 1998).

Therefore, *teswuino* gatherings are essential spaces to be in contact with privileged information and observations related to a range of issues (forms of labour organisation, livelihood strategies, priorities and constraints), and hence crucial opportunities during fieldwork to obtain information. Additionally, gatherings constitute socialising spaces where crucial information is shared such as weather forecasts; when the monthly visits from the health services will take place; or which national government candidates will be running for leadership. This is also the space for gossip and where personal disputes are settled.

As my research interest dealt with issues of how a sense of communal solidarity and cooperation is built and acted out – as important components of their notion of wellbeing – participating in as many of these gatherings as possible became vital. These gatherings are special moments in the locality and have an implicit joyful atmosphere due to the fact that they are considered celebrations and collective expressions of community to which it is considered an honour to be invited. As a result, participation in a joyful manner, and having the ability – and willingness – to contribute with physical labour in the collective task to afterwards gain the *teswuino* was necessary in order to obtain valuable insights, understand events from different perspectives, and obtain detailed descriptions of the ritual. Therefore, the importance of being happy, active, and to take part with a good attitude towards the collective expectations of the community was required as part of the process of gathering and making sense of information. Once people began to invite me to the *teswuino* gatherings, or to assist at collective gatherings, I spent time mingling in conversation, hearing and participating in dialogues, exposing myself to new facts, corroborating information, identifying conflicting versions, or having the chance to meet potential informants. Accessing these important practices with a socially appropriate attitude and active participation opened up further spaces of social interaction within the community where being able to convey trust was a prerequisite. From a research point of view, these spaces are ideal to understand different angles on the issues they discuss and how events unfold in a more comprehensive manner.

Feeling integrated and able to build relations of trust among the Rarámuri of Aboreachi came slowly in small but crucial moments when I was aware that I had entered – at least to some degree – a space of communicative confidence. During fieldwork, one of these moments came to me while I was sitting around a bonfire during a *teswuino* gathering among several Rarámuri men and women one cold night in February 2010 after working to erect a wooden fence for cattle. We were talking about how the Rarámuri people differentiate themselves from the non-Rarámuri *mestizo* population. Specifically, they were surprised that I liked *teswuino* and knew how to gain it by collaborating with physical work. I told them with a smile that I had learned about *teswuino* by past visits to other Rarámuri localities and, even if I was a *chabochi* (as the Rarámuri people name the *mestizo* people), I truly enjoyed drinking *teswuino* and staying in the community with them. After a moment of silence, some of them told me that I was not a *chabochi* but a Rarámuri. After a moment of confusion on my behalf, an elderly person explained to me that non-indigenous people often treat them badly, in an abusive manner and take advantage of the Rarámuri. Others went on to explain how some *mestizos* from the Laguna of Aboreachi town came with their trucks to their houses to trick them into buying sick horses, mules or cows.[9] That kind of person was named with the term *chabochi*, meaning 'whiskered ones' in the Rarámuri language. I told them that I did not understand, I did not identify with those merchants from the Laguna of Aboreachi but I didn't feel I was considered as Rarámuri either. The elder person told me that it does not matter, if you respect our ways, live like us and don't try to take advantage then you are not a *chabochi* but a Rarámuri. That night I felt that a communicative bridge had been built.

Another implication during fieldwork concerns the way I, as a researcher, introduced myself in the fieldwork site and how that might have had an effect on the informants and information I was exposed to. For instance, I obtained permission to perform interviews and undertake fieldwork in both localities studied and was granted this according to the traditional way most anthropologists and researchers approach the local population. In the *mestizo* community, I talked with the *Comisariado ejidal*, identified as the authority from the *ejido*. In the Rarámuri

locality, I was officially introduced during a community meeting where the traditional leader (*Seriame*) allowed me to talk about my research and the intentions of my visit, and people were able to ask questions about my work. As a result, most of the residents were aware of my intentions as a researcher from the beginning of fieldwork. However, at the same time, I was introduced by the traditional channels of authority in each case and therefore informants might have perceived me as being associated with those figures of power and therefore, perhaps, granted me greater access to those informants in positions of power within the *mestizo* and the Rarámuri. This is particularly important in identifying and documenting narratives and discourses of wellbeing in relation to marginalised and excluded individuals (Clark 2002). In addition, there is a tendency when using collective methods to present a homogenous narrative based on a shared sense of community that hides diversity of positions within a social group (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

Being aware of this, I interviewed and interacted with as many individuals as possible in the localities, including apparent socially marginalised individuals and households within the localities, as a way to overcome this possible effect. I was also aware that my gender and age might affect data collection and the overall fieldwork experience as it was much easier for me to approach and build trust with males than females. Overall, I aimed to build a reflective and conversational community with informants not only to obtain information, but crucially as a way to verify and validate sources of information.

4 Unpacking the emic discourse of wellbeing from the Rarámuri
Having faced and overcome methodological challenges during fieldwork, I gathered information on a range of issues; one of them focuses on what the Rarámuri consider to be wellbeing. By providing ethnographic evidence, I argue that understandings of wellbeing are not universal, but instead are subject to and influenced by sociocultural and political contexts (Diener and Suh 2000; Baumeister 2001; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008; Calestani 2011; Kaved ija 2012). A discourse of what living well can be is identifiable through empirical narratives collected from fieldwork. These narratives are not limited to a single concept or a small number of dimensions, but instead represent comprehensive meanings that tell a story about realising contentment through cultural perseverance, in relation to the Rarámuri expression of 'living your life through the correct path' or, in the Rarámuri language, '*Gara wachi inaropo nai gawich*'. This notion is linked to ideas of happiness, being productive and maintaining harmony with the social, physical and spiritual world. This relates to the apparent ability to endure and make do with what one faces in life. Authors such as Jackson (2011), exploring the notions of wellbeing among the Kuranko people in Sierra Leone, also describe this aspect.

Specifically, two dimensions of a discourse became evident during interviews, informal conversations and participant observation, in addition to arising as topics of conversation when discussing what makes the Rarámuri happy: (a) the need to have a productive means based primarily on subsistence agriculture; and, (b) the need or desire to enjoy a strong sense of community through solidarity and networks of cooperation.[10]

Let us look at some examples of these narratives collected from the fieldwork that are helpful to illustrate their importance in Rarámuri everyday life and further exemplify how both farming and social networks interlink (note: all names of the interviewees have been changed).

> *If a Rarámuri household works its plot of land well – that is according to the group traditions and as the ancestors used to do it – then it will be fine and content, and won't be deprived.* (Interview with Ramon Castillo, Aboreachi, Mexico, October 2010)

> Teswuino *gatherings are to be with friends and have nice conversations, that's what makes me happy… all being one respecting others and living without problems.* (Interview with Etanacio Castillo, Aboreachi, Mexico, July 2010)

> *As long as we have land to work on and to inherit to my offspring there is no problem about poverty, with maize it's enough, it is the base to have* pinole, teswuino *and tortillas; food can be complemented by other vegetables gathered seasonally, like* quelites, *mushrooms and such… and if you have friends and family to help you that's also helpful. That's why we must make* teswuino *to offer it to Tatadiosi [God]*

and to your friends for helping you when you need it… if you have money and a lot of possessions people will have envy and that's not good, they will tell that you don't need help, you have too many things.
(Interview with Alberto Gonzalez, Aboreachi, Mexico, June 2010)

For Maria, a Rarámuri informant, life implies hard work; she says: '… a feature Rarámuri people must have […] having land and being able to farm means that you will not go hungry; on top of that if you have social protection programmes that will ensure some income security'. For her, poverty is when you don't have ways to secure food and hence need to ask for it. And the way to do this is through subsistence farming and cooperation and solidarity networks such as *teswuino* gatherings and the practice of moral obligation of reciprocity or *korima*.[11]

How are you going to ask for korima *or reciprocal sharing to your neighbours and friends if you waste you[r] money on alcohol and don't conduct yourself properly? A person needs to have dignity, not have many things, but to work hard in order to gain yourself* teswuino *and one means of living.*
(Interview with Maria Gonzalez, Aboreachi, Mexico, June 2010)

These examples give support to the fact that not only is subsistence farming important for living well, but also how solidarity networks or reciprocal sharing are crucial even more so for those households whose labour capacity might represent a challenge for self-subsistence in terms of the number of working hands for agricultural activities and the number of income sources. For instance, Maria relies on her extended family and friends' solidarity network to help and support her, this being a relationship based on reciprocity, not on undignified giving and receiving. Hence, the collective and communal dimension of living well is visible in this socially embedded solidarity mechanism of mutual cooperation.

These few examples of narratives collected from fieldwork are widely held among elderly and traditional Rarámuri authorities who refer to the moral obligation within Rarámuri society to attend and properly follow livelihoods and ways of living, namely based on subsistence agriculture, and to have a strong sense of community. It also describes the interlinkages of

farming with solidarity practices and cooperation that serve as part of a traditional welfare system. Most importantly, these narratives tell us a story, stressing the importance of those practices that are controlled by the Rarámuri, that are part of their livelihoods and way of living, and differentiate them from the rest of the non-indigenous population. This promotes collective association rather than focusing on individual accumulation. In doing so, they reinforce their identity and self-definition (Green 2006).

Analysis of the two dimensions also suggests that, for the Rarámuri, living well is accomplished by pursuing the right strategies with which to maintain their livelihood, such as subsistence agriculture; communal rather than individual ownership of the means of production; social systems that are heavily reliant on kin relations; and culturally embedded forms of sharing and reciprocal exchange – such as gatherings at which *teswuino* is shared – which entail collective returns rather than focusing on individual accumulation (Kennedy 1963, 1978; Urteaga 1998; Saucedo 2003). In doing so, social and cultural mechanisms maintain a discourse on living well by articulating the social practices that create ethnic differentiation (Gluckman 1958; Grinker 1994). Moreover, in other parts of my research, data suggest how living well for the Rarámuri also implies a cosmological understanding that adds to the complex implications of living well among indigenous people and contributes to greater ethnic differentiation on how to achieve wellbeing in contrast to the non-indigenous people.

These emic understandings of wellbeing as expressed by the Rarámuri are differentiated from and clash with mainstream or Western understandings of how wellbeing is or should be attained. As Mathews and Izquierdo (2008) show, historic, social and political contexts must also be considered, so that we may capture perceptions and understandings of wellbeing among indigenous people that do not necessarily match mainstream or Western values concerning development. This clash highlights a key difference between *mestizos* and the Rarámuri, in the sense that for the latter, the search for a means to live well implies the maintenance of living conditions that allow one to live well, and not necessarily that allow one to improve their condition through material accumulation in order

to live better, or in a manner similar to the non-indigenous population. As one example above suggests, material accumulation is associated with the negative implications of envy on the social cohesion and reciprocity of these small-scale farming communities. The path that the Rarámuri follow implies that moving forward is not necessarily to be equated with moving upward, a notion that is more firmly rooted in Western values of progress. The narratives are examples of a normative discourse of differentiation based on maintaining aspects of an ethnic identity as a way of living.[12] Accordingly, authors such as Peterson (1978a, 1978b), Gluckman (1958), Grinker (1994) and Okamura (2008) place attention on ethnicity as the main underlining factor in unequal relations between differentiated ethnic groups. For instance, Gluckman explores this area by stressing the dominant distinction between groups, oppressive forces that are made visible which illustrate the conditions of unbalanced power relations. In this way, the Rarámuri of Aboreachi also enhance ethnic differentiation between them, the *mestizo* and the state. Through this ethnic differentiation, in discursive and practical terms, oppressive forces are made visible to evidence the conditions of unbalanced power relations. This politicisation of culture (Wright 1998), is employed with the same strategic aim by other groups such as the Kayapo people in the Brazilian Amazonia (Turner 1991; Wright 1998). Both authors lean towards the argument that both the Kayapo and Rarámuri people have political leverage *vis-à-vis* the state by objectivising cultural differences and using them as a resource in political negotiations. The use of essentialising wellbeing discourses and cultural practices to evidence cultural differences can be a political negotiation asset for the Rarámuri, that by distinguishing themselves they thrive for the control and reproduction of their own customs and traditions which in turn secure their cultural survival as a group. In Asad's terms (1979), the author shows how ideologies and discourses are being produced and maintained by a particular ethnic group.

However, there is a difference in aims of the ethnic differentiation among the Rarámuri and other groups such as the Kayapo. The difference resides in the fact that the Rarámuri as a group do not have as much political space to manoeuvre in the Tarahumara region as the Kayapo in the Amazonia or in the national

political scene. Their way of reacting is not to try to look outwards but to look inwards to maintain their cultural reproduction. As mentioned, the discourse of wellbeing has a normative component that implies socially conducive behaviours for Rarámuri people to follow in order to maintain the control of key practices and cultural features of their ethnic identity.

Consequently, these two dimensions refer to a discourse of wellbeing that positions itself in contestation against a mainstream wellbeing effect. In a similar way James C. Scott (1990) suggests that counter-discourses take place off-stage and away from power holders and social interaction arenas dominated by the non-indigenous. These key practices and features defined and contained by their way of living (namely traditions such as the *teswuino*; solidarity networks; ability to engage in subsistence agriculture, among others) are culturally reproduced within the groups' own boundaries. Moreover, in the competitive environment in the region created by limited availability of natural resources and economic opportunities, the *mestizo* also promote ethnic distinction as they also enjoy self-defined political spaces of influence and practices that validate and institutionalise political and economic exclusion for the rest of the population of the Tarahumara.

Rarámuri–*mestizo* relations are not based only on cultural differentiation, however, as they form part of the same economic, political and social system despite occupying different social positions with different relative advantages and disadvantages. Like other ethnically defined groups, the Rarámuri engage in intra- and inter-group relations with the nation-state. I argue that their wellbeing notion can be understood as a result of two forces: rights and needs. Firstly, there is the right to maintain a 'traditional' livelihood based on subsistence agriculture, a set of cultural and religious beliefs, their own social political structures; and solidarity and cooperation practices that build up a strong sense of community. In other words, the Rarámuri understand that there are traditions, forms of living and cosmologies that belong to them, and that require protection when threatened by the effects of the state and market forces. The second force is the need to engage with the dominant society through the labour market, land management schemes such as the *ejido* system and the official government. In other words, their

'traditional' livelihoods are recognised as not being enough, and hence they call for participation with governments, actors and markets in non-indigenous spheres. However, most of these outward relationships are held in conditions of exclusion and domination characterised by asymmetric relations of power. These relations of power became evident as land conflicts that put pressure on the availability of a suitable farming area for subsistence agriculture; the imposition and subsequent power hoarding that is present within institutional arrangements such as the *ejido* which exert power over their territories; and discrimination that make evident their ethnically differentiated vulnerabilities. Therefore, in order to understand the formation of the asymmetries that exist between the Rarámuri and the *mestizo*, power relations must be taken into account from the moment understandings and notions of wellbeing are defined.

5 Final reflections

By providing ethnographical evidence, this article has examined how particular forms of inter-ethnic power relations have developed in the light of Rarámuri perceptions of what is important (i.e. what creates wellbeing). These wellbeing understandings are not universal, but rather they are subjected to sociocultural and political contexts. The article has argued that the Rarámuri people hold discursive understandings of wellbeing evoking differentiated ways of living from those described by mainstream development thinking and that followed by national society and *mestizo* people in Mexico. I conclude that some livelihoods and ways of living, namely those of the non-indigenous, fit better a mainstream discourse of development than others, such as those portrayed by the Rarámuri people. Therefore, by stressing ethnic membership and differentiation through the use of local notions of wellbeing, the Rarámuri people of Aboreachi have followed a path based on consolidating their cultural identity through strengthening internal cohesion instead of taking other routes such as building external ties with the wider society.

The clash of different views of living and achieving wellbeing implied in inter-ethnic relations, gives way to efforts to maintain autonomy and a unique identity that are for them a form of cultural resistance that allow them to keep being Rarámuri.

As I interpret the data gathered, the Rarámuri, as other indigenous people, see themselves as being part of an intricate sociopolitical context. On one side they are on the margins of a web of political relations dominated by patronage and power of political elites and economic policies that orient themselves towards the free market and the commoditisation of everyday life. And, on the other side, they have certain self-defined spaces where cultural practices are produced, fortifying their ethnic identity. Although they have a foot in both camps, they are neither completely inside nor outside either of them. This condition on the margins, however, represents being economically and socially vulnerable by a lack of proper recognition of sociocultural and economic rights by the national government. It also enables them to make strategic decisions in order to – if not negotiate the terms of relations with the *mestizo* dominance in the region, state and wider society – at least manage their role as an ethnically differentiated group from the state and national society to secure their cultural survival.

This article has also reflected on the methodological challenges in documenting local perceptions and notions of wellbeing, and experiences during fieldwork in the Rarámuri localities studied. Being aware of the need to create trust between people and researchers and participate in community proved to be crucial in order to create an effective conversational community with informants. At the same time, I recognised the need to reflect on our positionality as researchers by being sensitive of the researcher incursion into a pre-existing social and cultural setting. This is particularly important in identifying narratives and discourses of wellbeing and power among groups in order to control possible biases of information; for instance, through the ways that researchers are introduced into the localities studied due to their possible association with local figures of authority.

Notes

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1 The indigenous population in Mexico represented roughly 11 per cent of the total inhabitants in 2010 with a total of 52 indigenous groups and languages spoken. Mexico's indigenous people are disproportionately represented among the poor in Mexico, where, in 2008, a quarter of the people below the national food poverty line were indigenous (González de Alba 2010: 457). The gap between indigenous and non-indigenous is shown in terms of the intensity of poverty and levels of marginalisation (Garcia-Moreno and Patrinos 2011; De la Torre 2010; CONEVAL 2011).

2 The region is also home to other indigenous groups with much less population; the Odame or 'tepehuanos' the Warijo or 'warijios' and the O'oba or 'pimas'. 104,014 indigenous people coexist with the non-indigenous or mestizo population, which is twice as numerous (INEGI 2010).

3 System of collective land management created after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the subsequent Agrarian Reform process to redistribute land. Most of the indigenous population of the country live in ejidos (COSYDDHAC/Texas Center for Policy Studies 2000). In the Tarahumara, as in other indigenous regions of Mexico, ejido demarcations were imposed which were overlapping those divisions of Rarámuri towns or ranchos where they operate as cooperatives sharing the profit from the sale of natural resources, especially timber.

4 Oportunidades is the lead social protection programme from Mexico aiming to break the intergenerational poverty by focused interventions on nutrition, health and education. Procampo is a federal programme that promotes agricultural production by providing commercial and market advice, agricultural materials and technology, among other subsidised services.

5 This concrete example is consistent with literature concerning patron–client and regressive political institutions (Gacitúa and Sojo 2000). Other studies emphasise the historic legacy of patronage relations on official institutions that inhibit opportunities for indigenous people from effective involvement in the control over their livelihoods (Engerman and Sokoloff 2006).

6 Archives consulted include the Archive from the Coordination Centre of Guachochi for Indigenous Action of the National Institution of Indigenous Affairs (INI), and the Smithsonian Institution Archive Section of the Tarahumara Region. Both archives are held under custody in the National School of Anthropology and History in Chihuahua City, Mexico. Archives were consulted between September and November 2010.

7 Wyndham (2010) also describes this fact.

8 As with other ethnic groups, the Rarámuri have traditions and practices that promote social cohesion and produce and fortify their identity. Among these traditions are rohonama, meaning one should share, divide and distribute things among family and friends. Additionally, Levi (1992), studying trading mechanisms and the exchange of commodity goods within and between the Rarámuri and mestizos, has suggested a personal relationship among known individuals involving friendship and trust, rather than a mere economic transaction.

9 These professional dealers obtain favourable exchange and profit, taking advantage of the possible need and urgency of indigenous sellers in these periods of scarcity. In view of that, some commercial interactions are not celebrated under equal negotiation circumstances, as cheap alcohol plays a crucial role – given as a 'gift' by mestizos in order to induce a lower price in their Rarámuri counterparts (Levi 2003: 265).

10 These dimensions do not represent the entire complexity of the dimensions associated with living well. There are two main reasons to focus on these dimensions, however. The first rests on how frequently and regularly they appear in interviews, questionnaires, participant observation and other ethnographic accounts from the fieldwork stage. Their inclusion then is a true reflection of the voice of my informants which will serve as evidence to analyse and back up particular claims. The second reason is that relevant ethnographies, sociocultural diagnosis and anthropological monographs based on the Tarahumara region recognise the importance of farming activities and the social importance of solidarity and collective practices among the Rarámuri people.

11 *Korima* is a social practice which implies the moral obligation of reciprocity from those who are better off to someone in a deprived condition asking for help (Kennedy 1978; Levi 1992), and is also a key tradition. It takes place particularly in the form of food or money sharing.

12 Additionally, this discourse is socially maintained and reproduced by a cultural system of beliefs in the form of myths, legends and interpretation of natural phenomena that integrate Rarámuri behaviours and expectations.

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