

The Life of a Dress, Mexico

- Contemporary fashion and collaborative tradition

Amanda Ericsson, PhD Candidate, Upcycling Textile Management
The Swedish School of Textiles, The University of Borås
amanda.ericsson@hb.se

ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of a field study made in Mexico during six weeks in October and November of 2012. The concept, process and findings from a practical research project "*The Life of a Dress*", that contained a participatory design workshop given at a cultural center in Mexico City are presented together with an overview of five Mexican design and slow fashion brands. A less inclusive introduction about traditional handicraft is also given.

The action research project "*The Life of a Dress*" is a traveling exhibition presenting the concept of the revival of second-hand clothes through visual installations and hands-on workshops adding value to discarded clothes. The group of students that followed the workshop in Mexico City in 2012 created a collection of 50 dresses which were all labelled with a common brand "Hecho en Faro", collaboratively created in the premises of production. The project "*The Life of a Dress*" has been ongoing since 2009 and has so far been taking place in four different continents (Sweden, Hong Kong, Mozambique and Mexico). The aim of the project is to explore how design, traditional handicraft and waste clothing might be tools for capacity building and/or business development, on a local as well as global level.

The designers and brands presented are in different ways exploring alternative product development processes of creating and communicating design, identity and heritage through combining new design thinking with traditional handicraft manufacturing. The handicraft industry is a vital part of the Mexican economy and for many families in rural villages it is the main source of income. New products are developed in collaboration with craftsmen and respect is given to the time it takes to make the materials and products which are being made in close relation to nature.

INTRODUCTION

While consumption and production of textiles have risen to a higher degree than ever before there has been an increased demand for other ways of relating to fashion. Design schools over the world have taken on alternative fashion approaches where students are encouraged to develop their own role within the system and to find new strategies of combining sustainability, design, fashion and commercial trade. In this article the focus is on Mexico where the tradition of handicraft and textile heritage is strong, colorful and vivid. During a field trip to Mexico, three main areas were investigated; *practical knowledge of redesign*, *local design* and *traditional textile culture and national heritage*.

The first part, *practical knowledge of redesign* was investigated through a three weeks workshop, *The Life of a Dress* given at the cultural center El Faro de Oriente in Mexico City. The project started off with an exhibition and was followed up with a workshop in which secondhand clothing from surrounding markets were used as raw-material to create a coherent dress-collection. A group of 30 local inhabitants of the district Iztapalapa participated in the workshop. They were between 16-60 years old and had various knowledge of sewing and design. The workshop functioned as an up-cycling intervention around material re-use and the hands-on practice of recreating new products. As part of the preparations to the workshop, five different local secondhand markets were visited for raw material collection and to learn more about what products were sold and under which conditions. The project *The Life of a Dress* is continuously developing through the places and people it visits. Out of necessity, knowledge, wisdom, local and global culture and imagination give the project different facets. each being able to contribute to making new interpretations of the problems of our time.

The second part of the field study, *local design* was explored through semi-formal interviews and meetings with five contemporary local born designers: Claudia Muñoz, Giovanni Estrada, Lydia Lavin, Margarita Cantu Elleby and Paulina Fosado who are questioning the fast fashion way of production. These designers have all come up with their own concepts to create meaning to their own relationship to the industry, from the making of materials to personal stand-points about consumption and production. The designers use some of the many resources the country has to offer. Four of the five designers interviewed work with materials made in collaboration with small handicraft villages and communities. The fifth designer works under slow fashion principles with

production in a small studio in Mexico City where experimentation and treatments of materials and finishes take place.

The third and final part of the field study *traditional textile culture and national heritage* included a trip to Chiapas. Chiapas is located in the southern part of Mexico and is one of the main districts for traditional handicraft and textile artisan work.

The paper gives a presentation of findings from experiences of Mexican made fashion, redesign, contemporary fashion, tradition and relations to nature and sustainability. A background to the project *The Life of a Dress* is first given as the project is the vehicle for collection of information. The background is followed by a brief overview of the textile and clothing market in Mexico with a focus on second-hand trade in Mexico.

The Life of a Dress- Background

The Life of a Dress project is a traveling exhibition and workshop around up-cycling and secondhand clothing. The project was born in 2009 in Sweden aiming to explore thoughts around production, design and dresses that have become out of fashion. Together with a vision of a sharp future of fashion where the beauty of a garment would lie in the eye and heart of the curious and conscious beholder. It started out with an exhibition in a small bookshop's gallery in Paris, 2009. Second-hand dresses which had been redesigned and relabeled under my brand *dreamandawake* were sold and presented together with photographs which had been made in collaboration with different photographers. A rather abstract visual installation shared the story of a woman and her dress's journey around the world with the aim to give the audience a hint of how clothes travel. The exhibition was named "*La Vie d'une Robe*". The concept was developed further and in 2010 it was presented as an installation in a cultural centre in Gothenburg, Sweden. The audience, young and old were here invited to watch films and photographs around reconstructed and revived dresses. No dresses were for sale and instead the space invited for conversations around consumption and production of clothes and fashion. A few months later The Swedish Embassy invited the project to share its concept in Maputo, Mozambique. A selection of 50 photographs depicting different dresses and moments from different parts of the world was made. These were put together in a new visual story containing 9 different chapters sharing thoughts around textile production, reconstruction of clothes. Moreover, there was an exhibition with an open workshop where materials and machines were placed out for visitors to use. Upon arrival to Mozambique a first visit was paid to one

of the local markets for secondhand clothes. Here it did not take long until we had filled baskets with beautiful finds and materials. Some of which were little torn, smelly or stained, but had all potential for a second life. The *Núcleo de Arte* gallery was soon filled with dresses and photographs, and two sewing machines were set-up. Local collaboration with an art school was made and the students were encouraged to bring handicraft techniques which could be applied on textiles. The exhibition and workshop opened. For a full week visitors came to watch, talk, discuss and create. Local artists, passing tourists, art students, local designers and groups of children came to learn, share or curiously investigate the space. The project visited Hong Kong in 2011 for a three month long workshop at the Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity. Around 100 out-dated dresses were selected and placed in the classroom and a new character called SHE was born. 30 students participated in making clothes, sounds and visuals for The Universe of SHE. In October 2012 the project was invited to visit Mexico City. Previous workshop experiences had so far shown that ideas would develop more freely with a only basic set of materials and directions brought into the workshops. The participants in Mozambique and Hong Kong had developed products and concepts from locally sourced secondhand materials which had been easy to find in abundance. The workshop had functioned as a platform for idea sharing and practice. The same methodology was now to be tried out in Mexico.

Textile & Clothing made in Mexico

Mexico has a long and bright history of making textiles and clothing. The country has produced fibers, fabrics and clothes since 7000 years ago (Artes e Historia Mexico, 2013). Fibers to be found within the country and used for textiles are cotton, yucca, palm and maguey. When the Spanish arrived in 16th century the traditional ways of making textiles changed and with that also the common way of dressing. Silk and wool were brought in from abroad but became forbidden to produce for the local people (Mexican Indigenous Textiles Project, 2013) .

Today the textile industry represents 44-50% of the country's exports. The trade benefits from being a partner in NAFTA and a wide range of other free trade agreements with more than 30 trading partners giving favorable duty and quota-free routes out of the country (Pro Mexico, 2008). USA is one of the biggest importing countries of Mexican goods and in the last few years increased competition from China and India has made Mexico the fourth biggest exporter to the USA (International Trade Administration, 2012). Mexico exports 60% of all textiles produced to the USA, 95% are ready-made garments (Pro Mexico,

2012). 81 % of the manufacturers are micro or small enterprises, 15% medium and 4 % large units (Market Report on textile Industry and Trade). In 2001 the textile and apparel industry employed nearly 750 000 people in Mexico a number which in 2007 decreased to 500,000 people. At the same time the number of apparel companies of Mexican origin has decreased from more than 14,000 to less than 11,000 companies (Mexico slow to move from US supplier to global player, 2007). A small part of textiles produced are traditional handcrafted textiles, embroidered and traditionally dyed with natural dyes. These are produced by indigenous people that still live according to old traditions and customs in the centre and south of Mexico. Although the patterns and combinations of colors and symbols might be traditional, machines and synthetic dyes have become more and more common to use among the indigenous groups.

“Ropa de Paca” - Secondhand clothes in Mexico

Mexico is a current producer as well as importer of clothes. It borders the US which is the country exporting most secondhand clothes abroad. Many of these clothes have originally been made in Mexico and will throughout this trade find their way back again in yet another shape, basically making the makers buy back the garments they have made but after they have been used and discarded.



Photo: Bale of clothing coming into a secondhand market in Tuxtla, Chiapas

The unofficial number of second hand clothing entering Mexico is estimated to be much higher than the official one, taking into account the many secret or bribed deliveries passing through the borders.

"The border plays a part in the economic processes through which the value of used clothing emerges and how the unruly flow of these material goods shapes the social "fabric" of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands." - Gauthier, M. (2009), anthropologist specialized in secondhand trade between USA and Mexico.

According to an estimation made by former Attorney General Eduardo Medina-Mora in 2009, 6 out of 10 items of clothing are stolen goods, contraband or pirated products. Unofficial import of secondhand clothes is a common but forbidden act and police are set out to catch the so called "suitcase traders" which contains good from U.S. charity organizations such as like the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries (Samuelson, R. 2011). Charitable donations are under this same law and good willing foreigners who wish to travel through with donations of secondhand clothing to deprived Mexican people will meet resistance.

"The Mexican Customs regulations prohibiting the importation of used clothing and textiles or other used goods into Mexico, even as charitable gifts."

- Website for Mexican Customs (Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 2013)

Once imported, legally or illegally, the tightly packed bales of secondhand clothes are spread out in the local markets. Here they are resold in their current state. During visits to the markets we found a few young local design collectives which were using secondhand clothes and repurposed them through redesign and/or combining them with traditional fabrics. The up-cycled garment were relabeled and sold in the same market as the secondhand clothes/materials were coming



Photo: Group of designers redesigning secondhand clothes in one of the markets, Mexico City.

from. One of the designers was also working as a stylist and promoted the different products through social media. The design collective's reason behind the choice of materials was mainly out of necessity as the price for secondhand materials and clothes were lower than newly produced materials. Bags, shirts, skirts, hats and scarves were some of the product groups made. While visiting the markets it was easy to find a surplus of secondhand clothes from the American market. Dead stock and faulty products directly from the textile and clothing factories were also found as they could easily be recognized through the labels. A very small part of the secondhand clothes are also secondhand from Mexican users. These were normally well worn and torn.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF REDESIGN

Up-cycling

Up-cycling has become a more and more common phenomenon within the world of fashion meaning that old clothes are used and transformed into new garments. This is a movement which can be seen in most European and America cities where designers have engaged in the act of adding value to the discarded materials through design (Norris, 2012). In Mexico, up-cycling is not yet a common practice and in our field study we only found a few examples in the markets of redesign.

The Re-Mex Project

To further investigate the current experiences and interest of redesign and to what extend secondhand clothes were regarded as an asset, the exhibition and workshop *The Life of a Dress* was set up by invitation from The Swedish Embassy to participate in the project *REMEX- El Poder de los Artes* (The power of the arts). The REMEX¹ project was a collaboration between the European Commission of Culture, Secretaria de Cultura DF, The Goethe Institute, The British Council and The Swedish Embassy in order to promote different activities of reuse and to rethink material usage. The ReMex project took place in Mexico City during 2012 and featured artists from England, Germany, Mexico, Poland and Sweden. Through a series of workshops and presentations they combined their knowledge of textiles, plastic, sound, wood and manipulating dirt with a new audience in Mexico. The theme that ran through these events was one of reassessing the value of things using art and creativity to establish new values in what been regarded as waste or even a social problem.

¹ Re-Mex website, <http://re-mex.org>

The Workshop- HECHO EN FARO

In the RE-MEX project *The Life of a Dress* focus was on textiles and secondhand clothes and the activities of the workshop were held at El faro de Oriente with the common goal to collaboratively create a collection of dresses for a final catwalk at the Zócalo main square in Mexico City. The projects started as a visual installation/exhibition with storytelling through photographs taken with secondhand dresses in different countries and by different photographers². Eventually a workshop was initiated as part of the exhibition and during three weeks the participants who were between 16-60 years old worked their way through different tasks of making garments and accessories. A few students started to bring their own previously made products and some started to develop new ideas which had not yet been tried out. The classes were given 4 time slots a week for 3 hours each time. A few paper patterns were passed around which were being copied and further improved and transformed. The first task and product made during the workshop is a BIG MAMA (basic mini-dress similar to a t-shirt). This product is an "ice-breaker" and will lead to a first level of engagement and hands on experimentation among the participants. The participant will choose which material to use and which dimensions to work with. This task is performed and the result is collected through the camera and stored in the archive for further



Photo: Participants in the workshop at El Faro de Oriente, Iztapalapa, October 2012

² Photos from the dreamandawake project www.dreamandawake.com

analysis. Differences and similarities between different countries and groups of people are investigated. All classes were given for free and open to everyone with the only restriction that registration were made prior to start. Several students dropped in and out during the three weeks but a core group of 18 people stayed on during the full 3 weeks. Each participant had different previous experience and with that their own objectives in participation. Some knew how to use machines, some knew how to sew by hand and with time a smaller line of production were made where the participants took help by each others different skills. The finalised products were hung up one by one around the workshop and after three weeks the walls were full. A selection was made according to quality of craftsmanship and put together in a series of dresses, creating a collection named "*Hecho en Faro*". A logo was created in collaboration between two students and I as a workshop leader. This logo was screen printed onto labels in the premises and sewn onto all the garments in the collection. Each item was as different as its creator but by labeling them all a sense of coherence was made and the group's strong individuality transformed into a unified collection. At the end of the month it was shown to an estimation of 800 people at an event at Zócalo Square in Mexico City.



Logo above: Label used for the finalized garments in the collection HECHO EN FARO.

LOCAL DESIGN

Five Mexican Designers

During October and November 2012, five designers were visited and interviewed in their workshops during a field-study in Mexico. All meetings were filmed and questions about the designers thoughts about their own role in relation to sustainability were discussed. All interviews were semi-structured. The main area investigated and discussed was about the designer's experience, contribution and definition of sustainable fashion. The aim with the interviews was to get a brief overview of the current climate of young and established designers and get a brief understanding of in what way have they chosen to work with design and/or traditional handicraft and secondhand materials. The designers selected were found partly from recommendations from the Swedish Embassy and partly through local knowledge and word of mouth from contacts provided by the project's photographer

who is originally from Mexico and during the period of 1990-1999 was working as fashion photographer in Mexico City.

Trista³

“The road to hell is full of good intentions”.- Giovanni Estrada, co-founder Trista.

The first designer met was Giovanni Estrada who in 2008 co-founded the fashion brand *Trista* together with Jose Alfredo Silva. *Trista* has as goal and vision to make more with less. They produce two collections per year and are a typical slow fashion ready to wear brand with their full production made in their own studio in Mexico. Giovanni Estrada went to Casa Francia, the local design school offering three-year programs in fashion design. Together with Jose Alfredo Silva the duo has broad experience from the field of architecture, art and engineering. The two met in a radio studio hosting a show talking about cultural criticism and consumerism and both believe that the Mexican nation needs more local production. The brand today stands for simple lines and holds an experimental attitude towards techniques of dyeing, finishing and texture development. Materials such as wood and bone are used as raw-materials for accessories.

Chamuchic⁴

“In Mexico we are used to buy so many things coming from outside.

Why are we buying cheap clothes from Zara, when it makes us look the same everywhere? We need to have some identity. You go to one village and there is one identity and you go to the next and there is another.” -Interview with Claudia Munoz, founder of designer brand Chamuchic, San Cristobal, Mexico, October 2012

In the little village San Cristobal in Chiapas we met up with Claudia Muñoz who created the bag and accessory brand *Chamuchic* which is creating new designer products through collaborations with small villages and communities in Chamula. Handbags, computer bags, accessories, wallets and toys are some of the products being made with hand-loomed materials.

³ Trista website <http://trista.com.mx>

⁴ Chamuchic website www.chamuchic.com

“Working with designers in other projects its never a competitive thing as we want to learn from each other”. -Interview with Claudia Munoz, founder of designer brand Chamuchic, San Cristobal, Mexico, October 2012

Claudia Muñoz created *Chamuchic* as a counter reaction to how the fashion industry made Claudia feel. Claudia studied at the Iberoamericana University in Mexico city and after this she worked for seven years within fashion and production of textiles. She was soon involved in organizing fashion week in Mexico which is where she started to question the industry itself. She was not comfortable with the current climate and negative attitude of the participating designers and left Mexico City. She had no plan of what to do but went to Chiapas to learn more about traditional handicraft and soon found her own way of working with textiles. Her move all of a sudden made sense and by creating her own brand combining new design thinking and her knowledge of the market with traditional techniques, materials and patterns. Within her area she also experienced a difference in how designers related to each other. Instead of competitiveness there was a mutual understanding and will for learning and making constant improvements.

Omorika⁵

“I usually tell them to leave something, a mistake or something it has more feeling than something which was made by a machine and it tells the story that there was someone behind the weaving and the process of making”. - Margarita Cantu Elleby, founder Omorika

The designer Margarita Cantu Elleby lives and works in San Cristobal, Chiapas. Margarita is the designer and founder of the brand *Omorika*. Instead of sourcing finished fabrics, Margarita started to create her own. She spent several years in different villages around Chiapas and learned about weaving and traditional ways of making fabrics and products. Today she is collaborating with women from different villages who on passing the village market drop off finished woven materials as well as raw-materials to Margarita. For Margarita it is important that the garments made will keep their handmade feel and that they are not presented as something which would have been mass-produced or machine made. For her everyday is a new journey in finding new ways of using materials which for

⁵ Omorika website www.omorika.com.mx

someone else have been left aside. One of her key products today is a handwoven rug made with feathers from chickens which have been sacrificed in the villages. For three years Margarita has been working with these women and she has developed a rare relationship with some of the most hidden communities and artisan groups in the Chiapas region. She is also collecting and reusing materials such as plastic bags and cassette tapes from which she creates beautiful, luxurious and sometimes tweed-like fabrics in collaboration with women from the villages. She has a broad selection of products which are sold to different galleries and boutiques in Mexico, USA and Japan. Her workshop functions as an independent space for the women to meet and leave their children while going to the big local market.

Paulina & Malinali⁶

“Even the most simple thing takes a lot of time.”- Paulina Fosado, co-founder Paulina & Malinali

In Mexico City we visit the Saturday Market where the clothing and fashion brand Paulina & Malinali has a shop open each weekend. Paulina and Malinali Fosado are twins who started to develop their own brand after having worked with fashion and clothing for more than 15 years. Their father, Victor do Salvo was involved in protection of traditional values and indigenous villages. The concept behind their brand grew from a project made in homage to him. Early in their lives their father taught them that they would have to discover their own essence and stick to it, something which today is being translated into unique and beautiful garments made from traditional and one of a kind textiles.

“Inspiration is always different with the new textiles, you cant go back, only go forward”.
- Paulina Fosado, co-founder Paulina & Malinali

Their collections are made randomly throughout the year and garments are created around handmade pieces of woven and embroidered textiles made by women around Mexico. Looking through their products is like a long journey through the history of Mexican textiles as they have practically got one piece of textile from each state. Inspiration and ideas come directly from the textiles themselves which are sourced straight

⁶ Paulina & Malinali website www.paulinaymalinali.com

from the hand of the women who have made it. Fabric is never reproduced nor made in more amount than is already there when the twins find it. Paulina & Malinali have got most of their garment assembly in Cancun where Mayan people work to assemble the one-off and unique shirts and dresses.

Even though they have been up and running for several years they still continue to discover new ways that thread is woven or embroidered into new constructions and patterns. During their sourcing travels they get in close contact with the people making the fabrics. The makers live, work and see nature everyday, something which is depicted in the beauty and freshness of the work made with their endless combinations of colors and patterns. Paulina express this connection with nature as a freedom.

Lydia Lavin⁷

In Mexico City we meet Lydia Lavin who works on a larger scale than the other designers we have previously met. She has 12 people working in-house with her and has since 2005 collaborated with communities and villages around Mexico. 30 years ago she did research for the Mexican indigenous department in the indian communities as well as teaching at the University. This was a time when the new generations didn't want to dress in the traditional garments and old costumes started to disappear. 8 years ago Lydia decided she wanted to go back to the communities and started her own brand. Today she and her daughter design for their three different lines, Ready to wear, on demand and cooperate gifts.

They work with five different groups of communities that specialize in different types of products with which they match their new designs. One of the main problems is the difference in schedules and it has taken time to establish a reliable working relationship in order to manage production to a schedule. They look at global trends in product development and choose a color and pattern palette according to the groups they are working with. Some products are semi-handmade where industrially produced fabric is combined with fabrics made by hand. It took some time until the products got popular nationally as they seemed to be too close to the past. Lydia Lavin started to sell in New York, Sidney, Madrid, Houston and soon local interest was raised through increased international press.

⁷ Lydia Lavin website www.lydialavin.com

TRADITIONAL TEXTILE CULTURE AND NATIONAL HERITAGE

Fashion in Mexico is today to a great extent influenced by Northern American contemporary fashion. Outside of the cities, traditional ways of dressing still remains a habit for many villages which mark their history through the way they dress. Traditional Mexican garments can be separated into three main categories: modern clothing, traditional costumes with strong influences of Spanish and Mayan heritage and finally celebration clothing (Orellana, M. and Tuy Sanchez, A, 2004). Materials used in the traditional costumes are agave, silk, wool, bark and cotton. During the field study in the south of Mexico a number of traditional handicraft villages were visited. Here the way of marking heritage and belonging is made through the manner of dressing. Secondhand clothes are seldom used as they are believed to pass on the souls from the previous owner. The government has several ongoing programs for preservation of traditional hand made techniques in the villages as a counter reaction to more machines finding their way into the homes of the communities. During the interviews with the designers it became clear that the traditional ways of making textiles and clothing still lives on. It is picked up and further developed by a few modern designers interested in maintaining local and national traditions.



Photo: Traditional embroidery by woman in Zinacantán, Chiapas.

CONCLUSION

In Europe and USA redesigned fashion and vintage is a specialized market where the collectors and selectors, recognize and pick out old clothes for their interest and value, with the help of their trained eye and knowledge of trends. Little research has so far been made on how this movement could be developed further and integrated into the current system of global fashion. Meanwhile, there are more and more fashion labels weaving sustainability into their chosen business model. In Mexico there is an interest and strong tradition that combines with a creative force to work with and communicate through their textiles and clothing. The interest for traditional handicraft exists in the villages where nature is close to hand as well as in the cities. Up-cycling and redesign of current clothing is not yet a common phenomenon among designers. A few small scale designers were found but with limited sales possibilities. Selected vintage clothing was also a rare commodity and secondhand clothes were to the majority found in big piles in the markets.

Working with old materials is problem-solving and creative in nature. The participants of the workshop had to make the most of the materials as well as the limited time provided. The little instructions given gave space for experimentation and play, adding joy into the equation. As the raw materials used only exist in one sample per style, different conditions from conventional design challenges appear in a redesigning workshop.

During the field trip as well as the workshop we could see that there was a strong interest in redesign and up-cycling. In the workshop we found out that there was a tradition to use secondhand clothes as these were cheap, easily accessible and often held a better quality than newly produced fabrics from the area. Through cultural centers people are encouraged and given the possibility and tools to create unique pieces of work, objects as well as clothing.

The selected designers have chosen five different approaches of making products and by doing so create a fashion of its own kind with strong heritage and connection to traditional handicraft with time and space for experimentation. They do not use secondhand materials but have a strong opinion of sustainability. They all work with slow fashion techniques in the sense of product development and have a vision of long lasting products with respect to where the materials come from. The two designers working in Chiapas cannot yet say how their work is influencing the local community but they have already started to see a shift in the way the people regard resources and their old traditions. It has taken the

brands with ethnical approach time to reach local recognition. The national interest increased when the brand started to sell and gain press internationally.

Meanwhile the cities are overwhelmed with newly produced and secondhand goods. Unlike the many other countries where the import of secondhand clothing is rife, Mexico has managed to maintain their conventional production of clothes. The production is however in decline and more and more secondhand clothes are finding their way into the country through the borders. This is an area of great interest as any direction towards solving this equation will be valuable in many different quarters not least economical, ecological and also, and more importantly on a human level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the project's Mexican photographer Roberto Rubalcava who gave the project an invaluable guidance as well as documentation and photographic material. Also a big thank you to film editor Marcelo Vianna who put together the 13 minute long film "The Life of a Dress- Mexico"⁸, summarizing the project. A four minute long interview⁹ about the workshop was put together by the REMEX project's administration. Also a great thank you to The Swedish Embassy, Mexico for a well organized program during the field study in October/November 2012.

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