INDIGENOUS TOURISM NETWORK OF MEXICO
Mexico

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to 'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize', a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Indigenous Tourism Network of Mexico promotes a self-reliance approach to indigenous community development, emphasising sustainable livelihoods in communities working for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The organization, primarily focused on ecotourism and microenterprises, mobilises indigenous communities through a collaborative and participatory network with the aim of overcoming economic marginalization.

The Network includes 17 groups in 15 states, and over 5,000 members. It is leveraged to attract investment, offer training, find markets for local products, and advocate for indigenous rights. Training services focus on improving the operational, administrative, and financial capacity of indigenous microenterprise. Artisans are trained to use local materials and to cultivate herbal and medicinal plants, and ‘tourism circuits’ have been established to direct income generating opportunities to the Network’s members.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2010

FOUNDED: 2002

LOCATION: 15 of 31 Mexican states

BENEFICIARIES: 17 indigenous Mexican groups

BIODIVERSITY: Wildlife Management Conservation Units
As its name implies, the Indigenous Tourism Network of Mexico (Red Indígena de Turismo de México A.C. - RITA) is a network of tourism companies and microenterprises that are run by 17 indigenous Mexican groups - the Purepecha, Nahua, Popoluca, Chinanteco, Amuzgo, Mazahua, Tlahuicas, Hñañhus, Zapotec, Mazatec, Totonac, Mam, Chol, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Maya Masehual and Maya Peninsular groups. These indigenous groups are spread throughout 15 Mexican states. RITA was created in October 2002 when representatives of 32 indigenous tourism companies met in Trinidad Tlaxcala and decided that the creation of a network of indigenous tourism groups, led and managed by indigenous people, was both possible and desirable. In the decade since RITA’s establishment, the number of groups involved has grown steadily and regional sub-networks have also formed within the larger RITA network. Today, RITA is comprised of 160 microenterprises, many of which are also involved in one of its 13 regional sub-networks.

These companies offer a wide variety of services, each based on its own experiences, interests and circumstances. However, all of the companies engage in projects that focus on conservation and the sustainable use of nature, while also training members in indigenous rights, cultural revaluation and indigenous identity. RITA’s presence in 15 of the country’s thirty-one states and federal district means that the organization works in a variety of landscapes including forest, jungle, swamp, wetland and desert ecosystems. While each company works autonomously, best practices are shared within the network to strengthen and enrich the work of RITA companies. Table 1 lists the companies and regional networks active in each of the 15 states where RITA operates.

**Capitalizing on natural wealth**

A central motivation for the creation of RITA was to address the marginalization of indigenous people, who traditionally attain the lowest levels of well-being according to Mexican statistics (e.g. low educational attainment, poor employment opportunities and low income), despite being located in territories with abundant biodiversity compared to the rest of the nation. According to Mexico’s 2005 population and housing census (the latest available at the time of writing), approximately 9 million indigenous people, constituting 14 per cent of the total national population, live in approximately 5,700 rural communities in central and southern Mexico in extreme poverty. Simultaneously, Mexico is among the most biodiverse country in world, with the majority of its most biodiverse areas located in indigenous territories. Furthermore, water that is captured in these areas services not only these ecosystems, but the larger population of the country.
RITA was born out of the idea that the lives of indigenous communities could be improved by taking advantage of the paradoxical situation whereby the most impoverished groups were sitting on the country’s greatest concentration of natural riches. By developing a network of indigenous tourism companies, indigenous communities could capitalize on the rich natural resources in their communities to generate income. In this way, RITA seeks to promote ‘indigenous tourism’ as a source of substantial economic development in indigenous regions. It also seeks to utilize the existing knowledge and interest of indigenous communities in the realization of conservation projects and the development of alternative uses of the biological and cultural diversity of their territories.

A further driver of the initiative’s creation was the desire to take ownership of the right to development that indigenous peoples have, a right recognized at both the national and international levels, and to reflect the natural and cultural wealth of indigenous territories, which should primarily serve to further the development and food security of their inhabitants. The initiative was also an attempt to challenge outsiders’ perspectives of indigenous peoples through cultural revaluation, and additionally to change indigenous people’s perspectives of themselves, to strengthen their identity as agents of their own development.

**Goals and governance principles**

RITA works with its member companies to overcome poverty in the indigenous communities involved in the initiative. The goal is not

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**Table 1: RITA companies and sub-networks by state**

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<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Companies (not part of a regional sub-network)</th>
<th>Regional Networks</th>
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<tr>
<td>Campeche</td>
<td>Ecotourism Cabanas of U Beel Maya</td>
<td>Tzeltal Tzotzil Circuit</td>
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<td>The Root of the Future</td>
<td>Lumal Maya</td>
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<td>Chiapas</td>
<td>New Alliance Ecotourism Center</td>
<td>Tzeltal Tzotzil Circuit</td>
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<td>Chol Xumulhá</td>
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<td>Mayan Women of Jovel</td>
<td>Xochipa Network</td>
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<td>Distrito Federal</td>
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<td>Lumal Maya</td>
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<td>Guererro</td>
<td>Flowers of the Amuzga Land</td>
<td>Guerrero Indigenous Tourism Network</td>
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<td>Sireno Macho</td>
<td>Tzeltal Tzotzil Circuit</td>
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<td>Union of the Landholders of the Caves of Cacahuamilpa</td>
<td>Lumal Maya</td>
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<td>Hidalgo</td>
<td>Hñähñu Network</td>
<td>Hñähñu Indigenous Network of Alternative Tourism</td>
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<td>Tecehliqui S.C. Valley of the Nuns</td>
<td>Indigenous Network of the State of Mexico</td>
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<td>Michoacán</td>
<td>La Tzararacua Ecotourism Center</td>
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<td>Pantzingo Ecotourism Center</td>
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<td>Atekokolli Traditional Medicine Center</td>
<td>Nahua Morelense Community</td>
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<td>Quetzalcoatl Ecotourism Community</td>
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<td>Puebla</td>
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<td>Teht-Tlan Community Tourism</td>
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<td>Xkit Turismo de Aventura</td>
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<td>Quintana Roo</td>
<td>Cave of the Hanging Serpents</td>
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<td>Tabasco</td>
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<td>Tlaxcala</td>
<td>Integrated Rural Development Project of Vicente Guerrero</td>
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<td>Veracruz</td>
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<td>South Veracruz Network</td>
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<td>Tortoisheshell Ecotourism Center</td>
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<td>Yucatan</td>
<td>U Najil Ek Balám</td>
<td>Alternative Indigenous Tourism Network of the Yucatan Maya</td>
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Source: RITA (2010)
only to attain a higher income, but to provide means for families and communities to improve their social and economic situations through a sustainable process of development. At the same time, efforts are made to ensure the continuity of cultural and environmental values. In carrying out its work, RITA adheres to the principles of fraternity; respect of differences; honesty; gender equity; cultural revaluation and sustainable use of environmental resources; development while maintaining identity; cooperation and mutual support among members of the network and other governmental and non-governmental authorities; tolerance between different groups within society; recognition the efforts made by members, fraternal groups, and others actors; and social inclusion, respect, and full rights of indigenous peoples.

RITA’s governance structure consists of a General Assembly and a Board of Directors. The General Assembly reviews and assesses the actions taken during the previous fiscal year and recommends further actions for implementation in the next period. The Board of Directors, comprised of a president, secretary and treasurer, manages RITA’s resources and directs its activities in order to implement the recommendations and tasks as set out by the General Assembly. The Board also implements actions for the cultivation of new institutional relationships.

The General Assembly and Board of Directors are supported by several coordinating units. A Training Coordinator designs methods and materials for use in workshops, courses and seminars for members. A Multidisciplinary Management Team executes actions mandated by the General Assembly and Board of Directors in the field and office. A Community Outreach Monitoring Committee ensures marketing goals have been satisfied and monitors performance. A Project Coordinator implements and develops projects in the field and in the office to synthesize and display projects. A Coordinator on Climate Change represents RITA in forums regarding indigenous working methods, forms of ancestral conservation, and the positioning of indigenous peoples. An Area Outreach Promotion and Marketing Coordinator performs all of RITA’s marketing and promotion operations and makes necessary contacts for distribution and sales of services. The governance structure also includes three external relations groups. An Institutional Relations group follows and maintains RITA’s relationships with government agencies, NGOs, organizations, businesses, and schools. A Latin American Relations group monitors relations with tourism microenterprises in the wider Latin America region in order to develop knowledge exchange and build institutional capacity. An External Advisory Council advises the Board of Directors regarding future actions. Finally, the Legal and Accounting group provides legal and accountancy advice to RITA and its members.

RITA’s business model involves the creation of three-year strategic work plans that are reviewed and revised each year and are subject to consensus and consideration by its members. RITA adheres to two main principles in conducting all of its activities. First of all, that projects are initiated only with the approval of community members, since they are aware of the special circumstances of their own communities, and second, that women are encouraged to join the initiatives and hold equal authority and responsibilities. RITA also promotes responsible and equitable commercialization of biological and cultural diversity for these tourist companies.
RITA’s network of 160 indigenous tourism microenterprises together employs approximately 5,000 people throughout 15 Mexican states. The network is leveraged to attract investment, offer training opportunities, find markets for local products, coordinate with national and international forums, and advocate for indigenous rights. To attract investment and promote the tourism services of its members, RITA has established an annual National Tourism Fair. Activities at the fair include expositions and sales of tourism services; sales of indigenous art and cuisine; displays of indigenous music and dance; and panels on indigenous tourism and sources of financing for tourism companies. The first festival was held in 2009 in Mexico City, the second in 2010 in the city of Puebla, and future fairs are planned, to be held each year, moving between the states where RITA member companies are active.

To strengthen its network, RITA provides training services to its member microenterprises, focusing on improving their operational, administrative and financial capacity. Since its inception, RITA has held over 30 such workshops, on topics ranging from biodiversity as an alternative for development of indigenous villages, to management of computer equipment and internet services. Other workshops topics have included management of ecotourism in protected areas, hygiene in services, and analysis of legal figures. These workshops are frequently held in several states to facilitate greater attendance. To offer further support to its members, RITA conducts diagnostic censuses of their activities and services in order to determine and share best practices, thus allowing members to learn from each other’s successes and challenges.

In addition to providing members with training opportunities, RITA supports them by providing equipment and other assistance. Between 2005 and 2008, RITA provided computers to 34 microenterprises, created promotional videos for 16, designed and printed brochures for the promotion of 32, and designed and hosted websites for 16. RITA also created and later evaluated 32 tourist projects for its member companies.

While other ecotourism networks exist in the global south, RITA is innovative in that it goes beyond focusing on conservation to include the advancement of indigenous communities - namely, enhancing the economic stability of its indigenous members, with a focus on maintaining their cultural heritage. To this end, the initiative has provided training to indigenous members in order to enhance their skills and teach them techniques to manage, operate and market their own products and services.
BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

RITA has taken part in Mexico’s Wildlife Management Conservation Unit program (Unidad de Manejo Ambiental - UMA), a successful strategy that grants communities control of the use of their local natural resources. The UMA system is a legal tool used by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico to encourage the use and conservation of biodiversity by indigenous and local communities in national territories. Landowners may apply for UMA status, which requires that the land or other resource be used in a manner that conserves existing natural resources, directly or indirectly, under a plan for sustainable management. In turn, the landowners retain the economic benefits derived from the resources. Several of RITA’s territories have been granted UMA status. For example, two units were designated in relation to the Tzararacua Waterfall in Michoacan, one for the white-tailed deer and the other for the iguana; in Xochimilco, one unit was obtained for a biological station dedicated to the conservation of the axolotl (an endangered endemic species). In Puebla Xluluc, one unit was obtained for the protection of the iguana.

Through the work of its member companies, RITA has made several major achievements in protecting habitats. For example, in Guerrero, the community is responsible for managing the famous Cacahuamilpa grottos, one of the largest cave systems in the world. In Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro in Michoacan, the community operates a forest reserve of over 11,000 hectares of the area surrounding the Paricutin volcano and the Tancitaro mountain range. In Kantemó in Quintana Roo, the community maintains a reserve of deciduous forest, and bats, snakes, and other aquatic species living in the Cave of the Hanging Snakes have been protected. In the Juarez Mountains of Oaxaca, communities manage several thousand hectares of forest, conserving a very important portion of the Papaloapan River watershed.

In the state of Tlaxcala, communities regenerated an eroded and barren area of land, converting it to productive land through the use of traditional, organic techniques, conserving native corn while protecting soil and forest. In Tuxtla Veracruz, in Cacahuamilpa, an observatory has been established for the measurement and protection of the common swift populations living in caves there. In Guerrero Marquelia, efforts to conserve Olive Ridley, Leatherback, Green, and Hawksbill Turtles have resulted in the release of about 30,000 hatching turtles each year.
Through workshops, RITA emphasizes the importance of the measurement and monitoring aspects of its work, which involve systematizing and preparing relevant reports to present to the Council level of companies or communities in order to take any necessary actions. Each tourism microenterprise formulates its own monitoring and measurement system in accordance with the surrounding environment, using traditional indigenous methods to measure the biodiversity impacts of their work.

Some RITA microenterprises have also partnered with the Mexican government in the conservation of biodiversity. An example is the co-administration of the caves of Cacahuamilpa. The government, represented by the National Commission of Protected Areas (CONANP), joined together with people from surrounding communities and succeeded in generating the income necessary to improve the quality of life in the region and improve the care of the local environment, including these caves. Another example is Xochimilco Biological Station which deals with the conservation of the axolotl, a species endemic to the channels of the lake region of Mexico City.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

RITA aims to improve the lot of indigenous communities by generating permanent employment for indigenous people. When RITA was established in 2002, the 32 microenterprises that comprised the network had poor infrastructure and were not operating to their fullest potential. With RITA’s assistance, they have been able to develop projects that provide a range of integrated services such as cabanas, restaurants, trails and saunas, resulting in increased income to members companies.

The development of tourism initiatives reduced communities’ dependence on agricultural uses of the land, which traditionally provide unsteady incomes, with little or no income in the off-season. RITA’s assistance in creating and developing projects within these communities has provided a steady source of income beyond the minimum wages in respective regions.

RITA’s 160 member microenterprises currently employ approximately 5,000 people. Assuming four members per family, this employment supports approximately 20,000 people. In this way, the indigenous communities associated with RITA have benefitted greatly from their involvement in the network.

RITA’s level of inclusion is to be commended, and ensures that the benefits of its projects are shared as widely as possible in the communities it works with. Overall, approximately 1,500 women are beneficiaries of the initiative. Some companies are fully comprised of women, such as La Masehual Siuame de Puebla, Flowers of the Amuzga Land of Xochistlahuaca in Guerrero, and the Mayan Women of Jovel of San Cristóbal. RITA’s three-year work plans are approved by members, and regular meetings with the various indigenous groups are held to share experiences and work methods, ensuring that all members’ voices are heard.

In addition to improving the economic welfare of its members and their wider, RITA’s work has also resulted in secondary benefits. Development can be seen in personal projects aimed at identifying leadership capacity in the region. For example, youth are already playing a part in the conservation movement.

Further secondary benefits of RITA’s work can be seen in the work of several specific microenterprises. For example, in Guerrero, programs have been established that allow for some of the revenue from the Cacahuamilpa grottos project to be directed towards improvements in the infrastructure of the four neighboring communities. These funds have been used to provide support to schools, improve medical services, and pay for paving and sewage systems. Similarly, in Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro in Michoacan, there has also been investment of income to community services in the municipality. In Capulálpam de Mendez in Oaxaca, the management of the community’s resources resulted in its acceptance into the Federal Tourism Ministry’s ‘Magical Towns’ program, a program created to preserve and promote the culture, ecology and history of towns.
throughout Mexico. As part of this program, communities receive funding from the national government to develop concepts and services in order to attract visitors and improve local infrastructure.

Despite such examples of progress, indigenous communities are still in Mexico’s lower economic strata. This motivates RITA’s members, through their regional leadership, to increase involvement and membership in the initiative, in order to integrate the regional networks and further communities’ opportunities for advancement.

**POLICY IMPACTS**

The right of indigenous communities to make autonomous decisions regarding the management of their territories underlies all of RITA’s work. In this respect, RITA represents its indigenous members at national and international forums. In 2009, RITA representatives attended the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 15) in Copenhagen to take part in the preparation of the indigenous manifesto on global biodiversity conservation, as well as attended various national and international forums on environmental issues and climate change. Similarly, RITA secured a seat at the COP16, in Cancun, Mexico in 2010. RITA was the host organization of the indigenous delegates represented at COP16, and with its Latin American counterparts, worked to defend the rights of indigenous peoples regarding the environment and their right to make decisions pertaining to their territories. In addition, as part of Latin American representation of indigenous peoples, the presentation of RITA’s Coordinator on Climate Change had influence in international forums, including the 2010 Mérida Declaration of the Third Mesoamerican Congress of Protected Areas.

Furthermore, RITA’s members often participate as speakers at various forums and workshops on environmental issues and indigenous rights. In addition to involving members in these issues, these workshops and forums have also presented a platform for RITA to advocate for policy change regarding the attitudes towards indigenous peoples. RITA has advocated that indigenous peoples must be considered an entity capable of representing their portion of the national population. Additionally, several RITA members serve on Advisory Councils, legal bodies created by the Mexican state.

RITA has achieved some success in pursuing its goals in the judicial realm. In the Tlahuica region of Mexico, agricultural judicial authorities gave a favorable verdict to RITA communities that resulted in the local indigenous community being granted control over almost 24,000 hectares in the area of the Zempoala lagoons. This decision, after half a century of litigation, was achieved after RITA had contact with and contributed to the empowerment of community leaders from the town of San Juan Atzingo.

RITA has also made preparations to form an Indigenous Business Chamber of Mexico, a proactive plan to integrate other sectors or branches into the organization and bring together people in similar fields, or industrial or services activities, to share best practices. This idea has been welcomed by the International Labour Organization, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation and Development.

In terms of influencing policy, RITA cites corruption, and government and legal initiatives that are unfavorable towards indigenous people as the greatest barriers to its success. RITA’s proposals have also frequently been rejected as being traditional and anachronistic, and their efforts have often been ignored due to a lack of formal results and organization. However, through capacity building, RITA has become more prepared and its members have begun to overcome these barriers. Now, government projects and programs are beginning to take into account the needs and practices of indigenous communities, which has resulted in a greater number of invitations to participate in policymaking.

“RITA would provide three pieces of advice to other communities who wish to create an effective and sustainable project on biodiversity conservation. First, prioritize your achievements and traditional knowledge, and align local concerns with development plans that are measurable in the short and medium term. Second, you must ensure that the input of advisers and consultants is appropriate for local conditions, that interventions are focused on providing permanent employment, and not only temporary, and that regarding natural resources, you have real plans for preservation, not exploitation. Third, you must gain a clear understanding of all required administrative, legal and marketing tools, so that they do not inadvertently undermine progress. Information technology is an area of work that assists, it is not an end; it is only a means to organize and to define appropriate control in the daily work of the company.”

Cecilio Solís, RITA
SUSTAINABILITY

Since its establishment, RITA has sustained its growth on a foundation of credibility and service to its members. The key element contributing to the sustainability of the initiative is its people. Traditional indigenous livelihoods have always been sustainable and their enhanced capacity to deal with administrative, legal and commercial challenges has given them the ability to adapt to change and overcome competition successfully. RITA’s next step is to focus on strengthening the protection of the environment. Currently, there is a shift towards environmental education in the work of RITA’s member microenterprises. Indigenous people, with their wealth of local knowledge, are the best providers of this training.

One of RITA’s weaknesses in maintaining sustainability pertains to the establishment of marketing systems in order to provide a continuous flow of visitors. While RITA has begun to take action to market their members’ tourism services through brochures and websites, more work in this area is needed. Financial stability is also an issue, as RITA now acts as a socially-based network, rather than a consultant as it did formerly. Consequently, RITA must find resources to operate and strengthen the network’s infrastructure and capacity.

Some of RITA’s financial issues were alleviated in 2009, when RITA applied for financing from the Inter-American Development Bank for a project entitled ‘Consolidation of a Network of Indigenous Microenterprises through the Enhancement of Regional Tourism’. The project was approved for an amount of USD 149,662, with an additional USD 91,208 coming from national co-financing, achieving total project funding of USD 240,870. The purpose of this project is for RITA’s member companies to develop a uniform system of tourism services and promotion of their attractions, while maintaining the regional identity of each microenterprise.

REPLICATION

As mentioned previously, while the RITA network began with 32 member companies in 2002, the number has since grown to 160, with 13 regional sub-networks now in operation. RITA has also shared its experiences with various groups at both the national and continental levels in order to facilitate the development of similar initiatives in other regions and countries.

RITA has provided the basis for the creation of the Indigenous Tourism Network of the Americas, a network sponsored by the University

“Indigenous communities’ way of life and work offer an alternative way of living to the demands of modern economies, characterized by a common cause and coexistence with their peers and their natural environment. This is a proven path, and has brought indigenous people centuries of peace and satisfaction; politicians should consider this, to promote harmonious relations between different groups in society.”

Cecilio Solís, RITA
of Stanford, and Redturs, a Latin American community tourism network co-sponsored by the International Labor Organization. RITA is a founding partner in both networks.

In addition, RITA has shared its model through a large number of workshops with various governmental and non-governmental agencies, and has given talks and seminars at national universities as well as abroad. In sharing knowledge, RITA stresses the following points: how to strengthen community-based tourism networks with infrastructure; negotiating power with the authorities; models of financial sustainability; capacity for self-management of projects; and mainly, environmental and cultural issues specific to indigenous peoples.

RITA’s work has also been replicated through its events, in form if not always in concept or idea. Two examples are The National Indigenous Tourism Fair called ‘Indigenous Heart of America.’ In addition to Mexican indigenous groups, this fair also considers the villages of South America, and has sent invitations to African villages. This will enhance the impact and presence achieved by RITA, as well as the interaction between the indigenous groups in different parts of the world.

PARTNERS

Among the most notable agencies that support the project are the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation and Development, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, the Multilateral Investment Fund (IDB-MIF), The Association of Development Financing Institutions (La Asociación de Instituciones Financieras de Desarrollo - FINRURAL), the Ministry of Social Development, and the National Institute for Social Development, among others. Their contributions have been monetary, providing financing for RITA’s three-year business plans or have consisted of contributions to specific projects. RITA appreciates that these partners have or pushed for thematic or visionary adjustments in the projects.
FURTHER REFERENCE

- Indigenous Tourism Network of Mexico Photo Story (Vimeo) http://vimeo.com/15964775

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