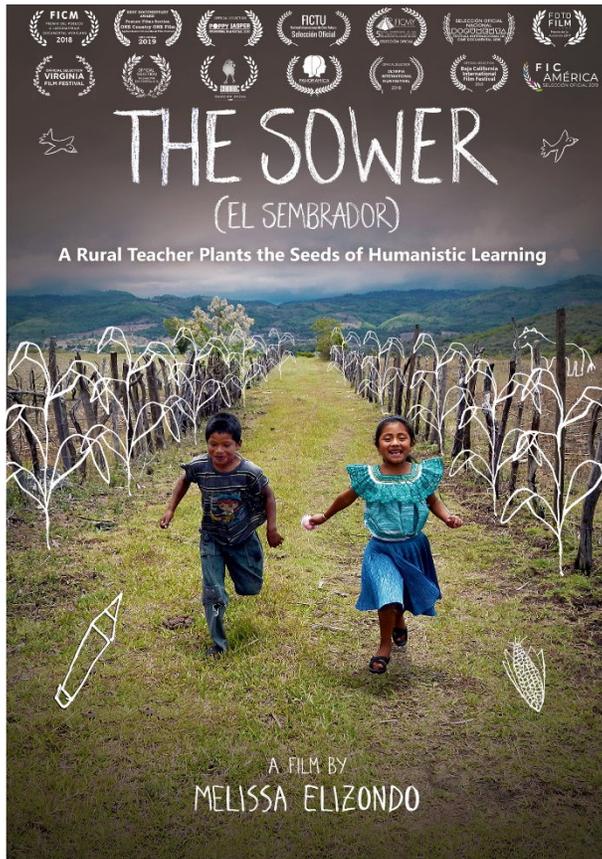




## THE SOWER (EL SEMBRADOR)



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## The Sower (El sembrador)

Amongst the mountains of Chiapas, a rural schoolteacher is dedicated to sowing the seeds of learning in a group of fifty Tzeltal children of different ages. Bartolomé has been a father to the children of the community and has made the school a second home for all of them. He knows education is not based on textbooks and cannot fit inside the four walls of a classroom. A true sower of knowledge, Bartolomé's approach to teaching based on curiosity, respect and the love of nature, makes his humanistic philosophy of teaching a beacon of hope to his community.

## Chiapas

Chiapas is Mexico's southernmost state. It borders Guatemala, the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Tehuantepec, and the Mexican states of Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Its capital city is Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The majority of the state is covered in forest, including rainforest. The population of Chiapas is approximately 5.5 million.<sup>1</sup> A large percentage of those people live in rural areas, with many practicing subsistence agriculture, meaning that they farm in order to provide for their own basic needs, with little left over.



<sup>1</sup> <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/chiapas-es>

## Poverty and Low Levels of Education

The state of Chiapas is one of the poorest in Mexico. According to Data México's most recent information, in 2015 about 42 percent of the Chiapas population lived in moderate poverty and 30 percent in extreme poverty. The agency reports some examples of that poverty. It says that as of 2020, 8.5 percent of the people in Chiapas had no access to a sewage system, almost 10 percent had no water supply network, and 3.22 percent did not have a bathroom.<sup>2</sup> According to 2021 news reports, poverty has increased as a result of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with 75 percent of the people in Chiapas now living in poverty. In comparison, only about 44 percent of Mexico's overall population is classified as poor.<sup>3</sup>

Along with very high levels of poverty, Chiapas also has low levels of educational achievement and high rates of illiteracy compared to Mexico's average. For instance, according to Escalera, an organization that works to improve the quality and access of education for students in Chiapas, many children do not complete much schooling because they drop out in order to work and help contribute to their family income. For example, says the organization, "From a group of 100 students who start first grade, 68 will finish 9th grade, 35 will graduate from high school and only 8 will graduate from university."<sup>4</sup> The National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) also finds lower levels of educational achievement in Chiapas, compared to other Mexican states. It reports that overall, 14 out of every 100 people over the age of 15 in Chiapas cannot read or write, compared to the national average of 5 out of 100.<sup>5</sup> It also finds that nationwide, approximately 94 percent of children between ages 6 and 14 go to school, while in Chiapas, the percentage is 89 percent.<sup>6</sup>

## Indigenous People in Chiapas

Overall, Mexico has a diverse indigenous population compared to many other countries. The International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs reports that about 15 percent of Mexico's population is indigenous, with a total of 68 languages and 364 dialect variations.<sup>7</sup> Within Mexico, the state of Chiapas stands out for having one of the largest

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<sup>2</sup> <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/chiapas-cs>

<sup>3</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/health-mexico-caribbean-pandemics-coronavirus-pandemic-a5d7085420f944aae06b47747fed357>

<sup>4</sup> <http://escalera.org/why-chiapas/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/monografias/informacion/chis/poblacion/educacion.aspx?tema=me&e=07>

<sup>6</sup> <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/monografias/informacion/chis/poblacion/educacion.aspx?tema=me&e=07>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.iwgia.org/en/mexico/3625-iw-2020-mexico.html>

indigenous populations. The state of Oaxaca and Veracruz also have a high percentage of indigenous people.

Spanish is the most commonly spoken language in Mexico, however surveys show that a large number of people there also speak indigenous languages. Again, that number is particularly high in Chiapas. INEGI reports that 28.2 percent of the population of Chiapas speaks an indigenous language, which is the second highest in Mexico, after Oaxaca. The most widely spoken languages are Tseltal and Tsotsil.<sup>8</sup> The Tseltal and Tsotsil are Mayan Indian groups that are closely related. Some of Chiapas' indigenous residents are monolingual, meaning that they only speak their own indigenous language, however the majority also speak Spanish, which is the most commonly spoken language in Mexico.

According to a report by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, in recent years, Mexico has experienced a significant decrease in indigenous languages. However, the report explains that the state of Chiapas is an exception to that trend, finding, "In Chiapas . . . indigenous languages have shown remarkable persistence. Over one million Chiapans, 27 percent, speak an indigenous language, up from 26 percent in 1990."<sup>9</sup> Many people argue that in order to continue to preserve the indigenous languages of Chiapas and the rest of Mexico's states, there needs to be a focus on bilingual education, rather than education in Spanish only.



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<sup>8</sup> <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/monografias/informacion/chis/poblacion/diversidad.aspx?tema=me&e=07>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.coha.org/the-last-of-the-mayans-preserving-chiapas-indigenous-languages-in-the-21st-century/>

## Linguistic Diversity

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stresses the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity around the world. It explains that many important elements of society are dependent on language, stating, “Languages play a vital role in development, not only in ensuring cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, but also in attaining quality education for all and strengthening cooperation, in building inclusive knowledge societies and preserving cultural heritage, and in mobilizing political will for applying the benefits of science and technology to sustainable development.”<sup>10</sup> Because linguistic diversity is recognized to be so important, UNESCO has taken numerous actions in order to promote the preservation of indigenous languages such as those spoken in Chiapas.

### Additional Resources

- AP News (August 5, 2021). “Poverty Increases in Mexico Amid COVID-19 Pandemic.”  
<https://apnews.com/article/health-mexico-caribbean-pandemics-coronavirus-pandemic-a5d7085420f944aae06b47747fef357>
- Jordan Bazak (October 17, 2016). “The Last of the Mayans: Preserving Chiapas’ Indigenous Languages in the 21st Century,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*.  
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- Minority Rights Group International (no date). “Mexico: Indigenous Peoples.”  
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- John P. Schmal (October 15, 2019). “Chiapas: Forever Indigenous,” *Indigenous Mexico*.  
<https://indigenouxmexico.org/chiapas/chiapas-forever-indigenous/>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/indigenous-peoples/culture>