



## COLMENA: POLLINATING SUSTAINABLE BEEKEEPING COMMUNITIES AND PRESERVING BIODIVERSITY IN MEXICO

### ***Background***

Mexico is ranked as the third honey exporter in the world, with an average of 25,500 tons per year, mainly to the United Kingdom and Germany. According to the Mexican Government data (2018), we export the 68% of our production and the average price reported for one kilo of honey is €1.7<sup>1</sup>; whilst the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural development of the European Commission reported an average import price of €2.82 (2018).<sup>2</sup> On top of this gap, the reality for mexican beekeepers is that their honey is either bought by a middle man for an average of €1 per kilo,<sup>3</sup> or by the mexican market that pays around €3 per kilo but only consumes an average 200 gr. of honey per capita per year.<sup>4</sup>

### ***On Social justice***

*“People closest to the pain should be closer to the power”*

—AYANNA PRESSLEY

Like in every agricultural business, the larger the scale of the producer, the higher revenue they get for their production. Numbers only represent how the industry works, however beekeepers' reality becomes harder when we put in perspective their human needs. [...] politics has excluded farmers and peasants from the democratic process. In the wealthy West this is because their number is almost irrelevant; in much of the world's South it is because they are considered as masses to be exploited at election time, but undeserving even of a decent quality of life.<sup>5</sup>

I truly believe that together, committed and informed producers and consumers, can change this reality by increasing honey consumption locally with a new system that is sustainable both economically and environmentally.

## On Politics and economics

*“Food is politics, respect for diversity is politics, the way in which we care for nature is politics... The poetry and politics of Terra Madre teach the world to stop brutalizing itself, to halt the process of global homogenization that is debasing people and depriving them of any power of self-determination.”<sup>5</sup>*

—CARLO PETRINI. *TERRA MADRE*

On average, one kilo of honey imported into the EU in 2016 cost €2.23 while one kilo of honey exported from the EU cost €5.69. <sup>6</sup> The EU imports 200,000 tons of honey, and exports about 20,000 tons per year. In 2018. In London supermarkets, a blend of EU and non-EU honeys (planet Earth!) in a 454 gr. jar costs £1.89, whilst a 340 gr jar of British blended honey from intensive beekeeping practices costs £5, and a 350 gr. jar of honey from a local beekeeper at the farmers market costs in average £9.

With these facts some questions arise: Why it is cheaper to buy a blend of EU and non-EU honeys (planet Earth!) including transportation charge? Who is really paying for the low cost of blended honey? Is there any possibility that the governments of the importer countries encourage the local consumption of their honeys, respecting the job of their beekeepers and the preservation of the environment locally? What impact has the local consumption of honey in the exporter countries? Are beekeepers in Mexico focused only on exporting, damaging the environment bringing their bees to intensive agricultural sources? Are there any international cooperation efforts to regulate this issue? How can we build a network to celebrate diversity and to empower those who preserve it?



## *On Environment*

*“Biodiversity touches every aspect of our lives –so why its loss been ignored?”*

–ROBERT WATSON<sup>7</sup>

According to the FAO (2019), approximately 80 percent of all flowering plant species are specialized for pollination by animals, mostly insects, and they affect 35 percent of the world’s crop production.<sup>8</sup>

Biodiversity loss is not only an environmental issue, it is central to development, specially through water, food, energy and security. It plays a central role in economic value as well. The loss of biodiversity hurts both people and the planet.

Bees play a key role in the ecosystem and in food production. Small scale beekeepers work with sustainable practices, they not only take care of their bees, they also act as defenders of the Earth. We need to build a new narrative to change education and society, acknowledging the importance and impact of every single drop of honey, which value goes further than the right price a beekeeper must get. But could their laborious and invaluable environmental work be remunerated someday? Would we be willing to care for bees regardless of their honey production?



## *The power of narratives and the danger of a single story*

*“Stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”<sup>9</sup>*

–CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Narratives change hearts and minds and have the power to justify the status quo, erase the histories of others, determine who has voice, and who does not. Social change requires changing the status quo, and the status quo is maintained by controlling the narrative of a single story.

Narrative is not just a slogan, it’s a story grounded in values and supported by facts, that shapes understanding and drives action (or promotes inaction); it becomes dominant through repetition. Dominant narratives become a source of knowledge, they create a shortcut to understanding the world around us, help us interpret situations and teach us how to act or react in the “right way”.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with a single story is that it robs people dignity. Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.<sup>9</sup>

### ***What we want to achieve***

Build a honey cooperative with a starting group of 5 beekeepers, 1 scientist and 1 communicator: **Colmena**. This will be a warehouse to transform bulk honey into a final product, as well as a place where we can gather and share thoughts and knowledge both for the members of the cooperative and the actively engaged consumers.

The aim of **Colmena** is to encourage mexican population to appreciate honey in a different way, shaping a new narrative to give voice to those whose words have been silenced for decades. We want bees, flowers, environment, biodiversity and beekeepers together to thrive, not to survive.

As a diverse and multicultural group, we aim to co-create simple and thoughtful solutions to engage consumers in a different way with the whole universe a jar of honey represents. At a political level, we are looking to address the economic and environmental issue to our government, demanding regulations and support to protect bees and small-scale beekeepers.

Together we are stronger, in order to spread the word and create a powerful network, our long term aim is to engage in a different level of conversation policy makers from the world through a celebration of honey and ecosystem diversity.

## **Goals**

Goals give us sense of meaning and purpose to search for new knowledge as well as to use their existing abilities and “stored” knowledge, and are viewed as the mechanism by which values lead to action.<sup>11</sup> Goals must be specific and challenging in order to encourage the development of our strategies to create positive change. Therefore, we will set three different time goals, because we want to achieve more than a movement that can possibly dilute with time, we want to set the basis of an organization that change the perception of honey in Mexico and worldwide.

- **Short term:** by the end of 2020, set the base of our cooperative, constitute legally, find a place where to settle and most importantly, create a business plan that will help us build a solid and sustainable community.
- **Intermediate:** by 2021, expand the network of the cooperative all over the country, creating a protected denomination of origin seal specialized in honey. The thoughts behind this idea is to inform the consumer, guarantee the quality and add value to the producer’s work.

The protected denomination of origin in agri-food always creates buzz both locally and globally. These protected foods are subject of profound debates where a couple of philosophies encounter: understanding the food specialty of a product and its access to the market, and the use and rights recognition to the owners of the protected denomination.<sup>12</sup> The acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of a protected denomination of origin permates culture itself, bringing a commodity back into a seasonal harvest, and the broken system into an equal exchange.

- **Long term:** by 2025, with the aim of expanding the network, we will organize an international event to celebrate diversity socially, ecologically, and gastronomically, inspired in the views of Slow Food events: Terra Madre and Cheese. With the idea of gathering beekeepers form all over the world, this event will be helpful to address the issue in a positive way, involving also governments, business women and men and policy makers, asking them to intervene and support of small-scale honey production, the economies of local communities and the territories they preserve with their bees. After all, who better than beekeepers can restore biodiversity?

## **Organizational Considerations**

- **What we have:** 5 committed beekeepers that produce all together 6,000 kg of honey per year. 1 scientist that can facilitate running lab tests of the honey and who gives advice to protect the bees. 1 creative / communicator, with a honey sensory analysis training, that will shape stories –with all the scientific and technical knowledge of her peers– to engage people in different levels.

In equipment we have: 3 honey extractors, 120 productive beehives, 40 empty beehive boxes.

- **What we want:** Rent a warehouse to establish the cooperative, where we can pack the honey, sell it, and host educational visits with the bees and honey tastings. This stage of the project could be fund by a kickstarter campaign, to begin engaging with the people.
- **Internal problems:** We all share the same passion for bees and honey, but this will be the first time we will work together to transform the industry, therefore we will face a learning curve that can be hard.

### *Stakeholders*

- **Constituents:** Business planner, Attorney specialized in brands.
- **Allies:** Chefs from the Slow Food México network, environmentalist organizations.

We are hoping to create a strong relationship with Slow Food International and move them to the Constituents box. Slow Food has the opportunity, through name recognition and use of internet and standard informational sources to create a space for public dialogue and action that can alert citizens to the weaknesses of the current food system, mobilize for political action, and facilitate, through direct local economic networks, the implementation of progressive food system change.<sup>13</sup>

- **Opponents:** Mexican cooperatives focused on exporting, big exporter companies, agrochemical industry.

### *Action plan: Consumers as stakeholders*

Even though the action plan to achieve the short term goal is still unclear and needs to be developed, this document aims to be a starting point to create a strategy to change the honey business in Mexico. I truly believe that consumers and all outside players can learn from the beautiful community model bees have, in order to shift from their role as consumers to stakeholders. Only then, we will make a change.



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### Other resources

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