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**SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND EXILE
IN MEXICO**

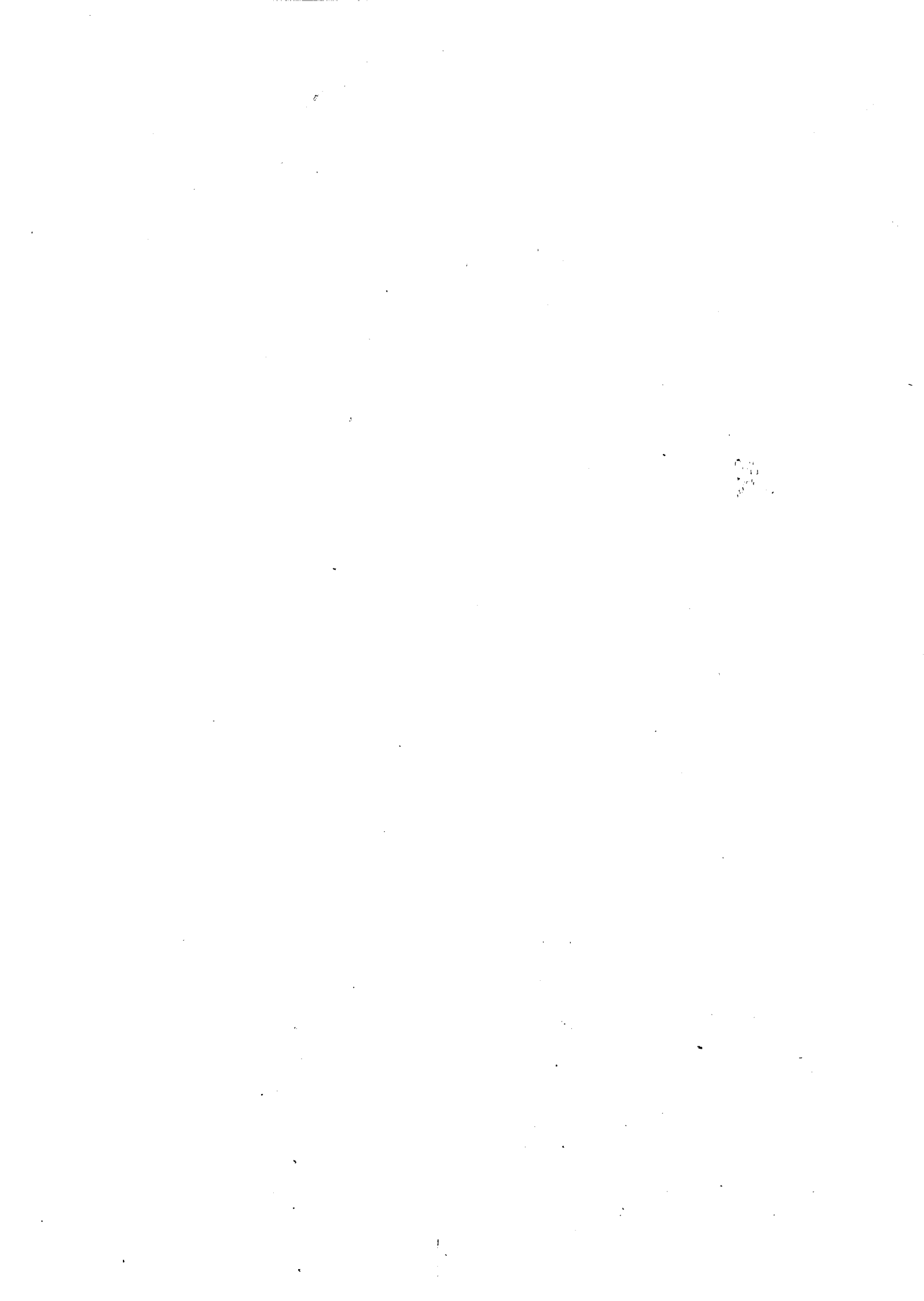
**Report on a field study among relocated Guatemalan
refugees in south-east Mexico,
August-November 1988**

by

Finn Stepputat

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Preface

The following paper reports on a study on the social dynamics in a planned refugee resettlement scheme in south-eastern Mexico. The study is part of a larger UNRISD project on **Refugees, Returnees and Local Society: Interaction and Livelihood**, which also includes research on self-settled refugees in Mexico, as well as on refugees and returnees in Zambia and Pakistan. The emphasis in this project is on studying the social situation of refugees, including the social differentiation among refugee communities, their strategies for re-establishing normal life, and their interactions with host communities.

The author of this report carried out field research in 1988 among the refugees of the Maya Tecún settlement scheme in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. These refugees were among the estimated 100,000 people who entered Mexico from Guatemala in 1982-1983, fleeing the Guatemalan "pacification" programme that left up to 70,000 people dead and 700,000 more displaced. They were originally sheltered in temporary camps set up along the Mexican-Guatemalan border and provided with relief supplies from the Mexican government and international agencies. However, by 1983 it had become clear that the approximately 46,000 refugees in these camps would not be repatriated in the near future, and the Mexican government, along with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), implemented longer term strategies to deal with the refugee population. One such strategy was the establishment of settlements, like that at Maya Tecún, as part of an effort to encourage self-sufficiency among the refugees, and to reduce their dependence on relief supplies. The refugees were provided with land and with opportunities for wage employment, and the relief supplies provided to them were curtailed significantly.

This paper describes the composition of the refugee population, and provides an overview of the events that resulted in their settlement at Maya Tecún, and the conditions under which they live. It goes on to analyse the process by which this initially dependent community is being transformed, perforce, into a self-sufficient one. The author discusses both the factors that entered into the decision on the part of the host country to resettle the refugees and the economic and social strains that emerged in the refugee community as a result of this policy. An important part of his analysis is a discussion of the interactions between the refugees, the surrounding Mexican population, and the refugee program administrators.

Stepputat's emphasis on social analysis has proved to be a very valuable one in the refugee context. His thorough exploration of the internal organization within the refugee community, as well as the social dynamics of the refugees' economic integration into the regional economy and the growing economic differentiation among them, enables him to uncover reasons for organizational successes and failures, and reveals some of the important, though seldom recognized, dilemmas of resettlement facing refugee populations.

His approach also provides a means for better understanding group and individual behaviour in the refugee setting. For instance, he argues that the lack of a tradition of communal farming in many communities hindered several carefully planned agricultural schemes, and that the desire to avoid government control over their production led many refugees to lease land from neighboring Mexicans rather than participate in the agricultural projects organized on their behalf. Among the reasons Stepputat discovered for a surprising resistance among the Maya Tecún refugees towards resettlement to a seemingly more attractive site were a reluctance to disturb, once again, their social environment; an uncertainty, originating in their experience in Guatemala, over future land ownership rights; and a wish to remain a visible refugee population, rather than to be integrated into the Mexican society, as a form of political protest and expression.

Future UNRISD work on refugees, returnees, and local society will help to broaden the picture presented in this paper to include other communities in Mexico, as well as in Africa and Asia. It will continue to emphasize social dynamics but will explore other settings, including different kinds of host-refugee relationships, and in self-settled rather than scheme-settled refugee communities.

Dharam Ghai
Director

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1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to describe and analyse the situation of Guatemalan refugees living in the Yucatán peninsula in south-east Mexico. The refugees arrived in Mexico in 1981-83, but the Mexican government decided to move them to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo (Q.Roo) in 1984. Funded by UNHCR, the Mexican Commission for Assistance to Refugees (COMAR) has established five settlements, and the two organizations in co-operation have launched a programme designed to help the refugees to become self-sufficient.

The increasingly prolonged character of refugee situations in the contemporary world has forced international relief organizations to consider the transition from emergency relief to self-sufficiency. Central America provides one example, and the Yucatán settlements are the first in the region to undertake a programme for self-sufficiency. Hence, it is important to learn from this experience.

This report is a preliminary analysis of interviews, observations, and statistical data which I collected during my fieldwork from August to November 1988 in the Maya Tecún settlement in the state of Campeche. The report provides a brief description of the 6,800 inhabitants: their backgrounds and experience; their present organization; and their responses to the programme for self-sufficiency. The programme is akin to other Mexican development schemes, but the responses of the refugees are shaped by the necessary and existential choice between repatriation and local integration.

The refugees constitute an important piece in the complicated political jigsaw puzzle of Central America. Therefore, many interested parties communicate their views on the situation to the refugees. Broadcast news from government, rebel and other transmitters in Florida, Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua reach the refugees. And UNHCR delivers letters and tapes from the refugees' relatives in Guatemala begging the refugees to return. (This noteworthy service by UNHCR provides an important channel of communication between the refugees and UNHCR officials.)

When I first presented myself to the representatives of the Guatema-

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