

## Chapter 15 – Jorge - Government official

“Jorge” is a government official. Although he did not insist on anonymity, I changed his name and any references to his state anyway. While I am pretty sure he didn’t tell me any state secrets, he was unusually forthright and answered any questions I put to him, which is not what I have been used to when talking to government officials. I would have hated to see him penalized in any way for his honesty.

Actually much of what he said was alluded to by other Mexican people who did not work for the government, so he was confirming what had been anecdotal evidence. Since this interview was done in early 2008, I’ve heard from other sources that some of the programs he mentioned have changed, and in some states, been eliminated to be replaced by other programs. The specifics are not what is important in the scope of this book. I don’t think that many foreigners were even aware that such government assistance existed.

After the crises of 2009, another government employee told me of special unemployment benefits and training programs for people who were unemployed to learn new skills. I have only the one source for this, but he said that anyone who has become unemployed can receive a one-time payment of 3,500 pesos. The recipient must prove he lost his job (he could not have just quit) and must enroll in a class to learn a new skill to receive the money. An unemployed person can also withdraw ten percent of his retirement account without penalty. Lastly, the federal government offers a one-time grant of 25,000 pesos to start a business. I am not sure what qualifications you have to have for this.

Before I started recording, we had been having a conversation about misconceptions that foreigners have about Mexico. One that we’d started discussing was government help for people who needed it.

*So there are social services for people who need it? What sort of services does the government provide?*

We pay the people here [we were in a small village] so the parents can live and the children can go to school instead of having to work to help the family. It does not have to be just really poor people either. The owner of a small business can still qualify. We pay so the children will get an education.

*You pay the parent so the children can stay in school?*

Yes, and more. For example, for farmers, the government pays for the plants for them to plant their fields.

*How much does the government pay?*

I would have to look up the exact figures, but I think maybe for one hectare we pay 1,000 pesos 1 or 2 times a year. If you have 100 hectares times 2,000 pesos that can add up to a lot. Of course, that money is supposed to offset the cost of cultivation.

*The people who have the children, do they usually have the property?*

The people own land but they don't want to work it. Maybe they want to operate a restaurant instead. Or they don't want to work very hard; they prefer just to have the money without working.

Everyone owns part of the land; it's part of the *ejido* system.

*Everyone has a part of the land? What is the average size?*

Maybe 4 or 5 hectares. Each family owns 4 or 5 hectares. Like 6 acres *mas* or *menos*. The federal government gives all of them in the *ejido* money.

*So let me repeat this to make sure I have it right, since this is very new information for me. For each hectare they get 1,000 or 2,000 pesos; they receive that money 1 or 2 times a year. And that's so they won't hire out their children; so the children can go to school?*

Or they just don't work. If they want to plant the land or even if they don't plant it- there goes the money.

*So if I own a small plot of land, say four hectares, , the federal government gives me 4,000 pesos two times a year – even if I do not plant a field? I can take that 4,000 pesos and gamble it away, take the money and open a business like a restaurant or something?*

That's the problem; the land is dry and not planted. The money from the government, we want them to use it to work and make their living.

*If I have children, the government pays me to send them to school?*

Yes, that's another thing. If have a child, he goes to school, and the government will help with a *beca* (a scholarship); maybe 500 or 1,000 pesos a month to help you with food and things. But maybe the kid doesn't go to school and they just take the money.

*I read that if the child doesn't go to school the government stops paying. They stop giving the money.*

Yes, but the politician thinks, "The election is in mid-year, so I am going to give you the money anyway." That's the problem with the government; they give the money anyway.

*So there is a social program or network in Mexico like in the US. What if I live in the city and don't have land?*

There are other ways. There is this program, *oportunidades* (opportunities). Then there are other ways the government can give you money. They can give you some commodities for one or two months. If you don't have work, they can give you without cost, maybe, tools to work. A package with a cost of maybe 8,000 pesos for free so you can work at what you want. If you don't use it, if you don't work, then you don't get any more.

*That is about the same in the US- we give so much money a month for so many children and give help with food stamps. But we never expect them to work.*

How many people do you think get government assistance in the US – a third of the population?

*I don't know I think it's less than that, I think maybe 20 % get some assistance. In Mexico it's more than that.*

*Is part of that because so many people, adults, are uneducated and they can't work because they aren't trained to do anything?*

They are used to the *patron* system. The government is the *patron*. We're fighting that and other things. Everyone can work, but not everyone works.

*Is it not a fear that may lead to social unrest, maybe a revolution?*

This is working in this administration. Maybe two administrations ago included these programs. But the people in this government – the entrepreneurs, the businessmen – they are changing their opinion of how these programs should work. They believe that people should work, not just get handouts. They are changing this, but it takes time.

*So there is a requirement that you need to work?*

Yes, this is changing, that you need to work. I don't care if you are upset with me, [laughs] the government will help you, but you need to work.

*Are they making new jobs so that people without educations can work? What are they doing to make sure that the kids stay in school? Because that's the future.*

Yes, that's the future. In the central part of my state the number of students is growing. Now we don't have the people going without schooling. Like in our capitol city, we don't have people leaving school. We have people getting degrees; we have a few masters programs and even a few doctorate programs. They need to study. It's hard and it's very complicated.

*People who go to the US illegally they say it's because they can't get a job in Mexico. Do you think that is true or that they just don't want to work in Mexico?*

Both. Mostly it is because the salary they are going to get here for a day is less than one hour in the US. The people here in this town do a lot of things, like make brushes and brooms from the plants. It is a lot of work. You have to work for two days to make one item. To sell, they need to go to another city to make more money. In our big city, they make maybe sixty pesos a day and that compared to the US dollar is around six dollars. That is for one day's work. The people know they can get a job making 6 dollars an hour in the US.

*But it costs less to live in your city than in the US, doesn't it?*

They don't see it that way. They see the money and they just want to work. They don't want to eat, they don't want to sleep. They just want to work get more money.

*That's true. I've talked to people who have worked in the US, and they have five or six people living in one apartment. So when they come back they are more comfortable being with their families. I think most of the people who go north want to come back, or no?*

Most. Some want to stay because they make new families in the US. If they come back and have \$5,000 dollars, they think they can start a business.

*Can they start a business?*

They don't have the money to make the business successful. Maybe if they do woodwork, like making chairs; it takes time to make the items. To make it a business you need to wait maybe one year to build it up and no one wants to wait that time. So by the middle of the year they don't expect to work again, and they expect the government to give them money. No, [laughs] that business is broke.

*And that happens a lot?*

You see all these trucks in this village? They came from the US. You see the closed restaurants? They were opened by people who came back from the US. They did not know how to run a business, or there were too many restaurants for such a small town.

*So a lot of the money that comes back, but it goes to waste? So what would you do?*

What I think is, instead of buying a truck, five or six of them could pool their money and become investors. They could get together and give employment to my people with maybe one small factory. Maybe they could not pay good salaries at first, but if they are successful, they could attract more workers. If the government gives them the money again, they just do nothing again.

*Are your ideas common, or do you think differently than most of the officials?*

I think the new wave of the government thinks more or less the same way as I do. We came all from industry, we were all businesspeople before we got into the government, so we have the same ideas. We want people to work, not just give them money.

*And they voted for you?[I had to laugh at my incredulity]*

[Big laugh] I think we are taking a good position. The people were ready for a change.

*In the US we complain about the bureaucracy. What if you cleaned up the entire state and they all started working?*

The more you go to the center of Mexico, to Mexico City, there are more problems. The cities in the North are more competitive. You can see how quick we are to resolve problems. You want to say this is a good place. We are trying to be in first place. I don't want to have problems with the unions.

*Are there problems with unions here?*

The most problems are more in the center of Mexico. The Pemex union doesn't have the power they used to. The strongest union in Mexico is the teacher's union. It is the biggest in all Latin America. A lot of people are in that union because they have one teacher for every 50 students.

*Would you prefer to live in Mexico or the US?*

Mexico. I go to the border on business a lot and I like the USA and the people. But I much prefer to be back home, with my people and my family. Besides, I feel that I am doing something for my country and I am very proud of my country.

*I appreciate the information. Thank you for being so forthright.*

No, thank you. If any of my information can help your people to understand my people, that is a good thing. We are neighbors. We need each other.

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