

Úrsula Oswald Spring

# Úrsula Oswald Spring: Pioneer on Gender, Peace, Development, Environment, Food and Water

With a Foreword by Birgit Dechmann



# **Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, Practice**

Volume 17

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# Úrsula Oswald Spring: Pioneer on Gender, Peace, Development, Environment, Food and Water

With a Foreword by Birgit Dechmann



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**Acknowledgements:** Peace meeting in Yautepec, Morelos, Mexico (2003) with Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala), the author and S. Eréndira Serrano Oswald. The cover photograph as well as all other photos in this volume were taken from the personal photo collection of the author who granted permission for publication in this volume. A book website with additional information on Úrsula Oswald Spring is at: [http://afes-press-books.de/html/PAHSEP\\_OswaldSpring.htm](http://afes-press-books.de/html/PAHSEP_OswaldSpring.htm).

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ISSN 2509-5579 ISSN 2509-5587 (electronic)  
Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, Practice  
ISBN 978-3-319-94711-2 ISBN 978-3-319-94712-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94712-9>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018947856

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Copyediting: PD Dr. Hans Günter Brauch, AFES-PRESS e.V., Mosbach, Germany  
English Language Editor: Dr. Vanessa Greatorex, England

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*I dedicate this book to the collaborative support I have received from hundreds of peace researchers, climate scientists, critical development observers and to my friends and colleagues in the five continents, where I have had the opportunity to study, teach and research. In particular, I am pleased to dedicate this book to my children, Omar and Eréndira, and to my small granddaughter, Charlotte and my expected grandson. I hope that the efforts to achieve an engendered-sustainable peace and security will help make it possible for them to live in a more peaceful world.*

# Foreword

When my husband Manfred and I first got to know Úrsula could continue with her research in Zürich in 1969, she was already on her way to a future that would take her all around the globe.

She had recently returned from Africa (1968), where she had gained many impressive experiences. Originally, she had wanted to remain in Burundi, but she found herself caught in the midst of the massacres taking place between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples. These two peoples had lived together peacefully under Belgian rule, but with independence ethnic fighting had flared up between them. Úrsula had to flee. A ship's captain took her to Madagascar, where she was redoing her life. While there was no major fighting under way here, the effects of former French colonial rule made themselves felt everywhere. Úrsula had the opportunity to study them in detail. It did not take this intelligent and critical young woman very long to recognise that patriarchal structures imbued the organisations and institutions in this country, that white people still controlled all the best positions and that the economy especially favoured the rich West. The peace researcher Johan Galtung later called these circumstances 'structural violence'.

When she returned to Switzerland, the student revolt had finally reached Zürich. The well-behaved, neatly dressed students had swapped their suits for jeans and Jesus sandals. They grew their hair long and like their fellow students in other countries began to confront exploitation at home and abroad. With great enthusiasm and engagement, Úrsula dived into this highly charged political atmosphere. She took part in many research projects where her practical experiences in Africa were very valuable. She also supported the 'Bunker Project', where young people set up an 'autonomous republic' in former air-raid shelters (bunkers) where they could make their own decisions autonomously. There were confrontations with the police. It was a wild time!

At the university, she wanted to acquire the knowledge needed to address and overcome structural violence, but the university was quite traditional and was not yet ready for this. So she studied many disciplines including psychology, economics, philosophy, languages and anthropology. It all helped, but it was not enough.



My meeting during a visit in Zürich in Switzerland with Birgit and Manfred Dechmann and their two children Dina and Caspar. *Source* Personal photograph collection of the author

Alongside her studies, she was active in many groups and organisations. From the outside, it was sometimes hard to understand how she could manage to do all that she did. Úrsula already dared to do a lot. She had a high level of self-esteem. She believed that she could do anything, and somehow that made it all possible. She was not afraid of important and famous people. She would approach anyone, regardless of their social status. She enjoyed speaking to Johan Galtung or Ernest Mandel as much as she did to Mr. Macchioni, our Italian neighbour, who presented us with the so-called spring cheese with the maggots jumping out of it just like they did in the Comic of ‘Asterix in Corsica’. Her friendly personality made many people like her.

She invited us to set up home with her in a community on two floors of a condemned building. In her flat, there were African drums, photographs of many black people, spears, spaghetti and a second-hand dishwasher (very unusual for the time, but Ursula was always up to date), and most of all many political discussions and heartfelt laughter. She made us native Germans learn the Swiss dialect and has in this way showed us how to win the hearts of this somewhat stand-offish people. It was a marvellous time.

It came to an end when Úrsula went to Mexico. Here, out of her engagement with the poor, marginalised and repressed people of this world emerged her life’s work. Thus began more than four decades as a citizen of Mexico, Latin America



and the whole world. From afar, she sent me her dissertation to read through. Never before had I understood so clearly how the World Bank, with credits for one-sided monocultures, destroyed the traditional subsistence methods of the people. The farmers were forced to accept credits to buy livestock they then had to sell for low prices on the world market. Before, they had produced everything they needed on very small plots of land on steep hills. Now, they became poor and had to move to the cities, where they lived in misery and were robbed of their dignity. The whole system was presented as a model of development. Úrsula was able to study the effects of the so-called development financing at its source. She conducted this research as a junior researcher with *Centro de Investigaciones Superiores del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (CISINAH) [Centre of Superior Research of the National Institute of Anthropology and History].

Once again, she witnessed brutality and violence, especially in Guerrero, the poorest state in Mexico. Guerrilla movements had emerged in Mexico in response to the negative social developments followed by military repression, supported and indeed demanded by the USA. People were kidnapped and killed without any legal proceedings. These violations of human rights were never investigated and prosecuted by the government. Úrsula watched all this with great concern. It was during this time that she wrote articles and a book on *Mercado y Dependencia* (1979) [Market and Dependency] and observed how the ‘agrarian bureaucracy’ decided the conditions governing agriculture and livestock farming.

This repressive bureaucracy had its opponents: independent organisations of farmers who collaborated with committed academics (CNPA: *Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala*) [National Coordination Plan Ayala] and *La Unión de Comunereros Emiliano Zapata* (UCEZ) [Communitarian Unión Emiliano Zapata]. They aimed at more autonomy for the farmers. Many of these campesinos were imprisoned or even lost their lives in fighting for this necessary step towards self-help. Úrsula and her colleagues organised courses so that they could better equip themselves both socially, legally and technically. Significant achievements were made. Sadly, even within these progressive communities, patriarchal structures were to be found. Sometimes, it was possible to make progress with the indigenous leaders, but sometimes, there was resistance. Women’s rights were not an issue. Úrsula therefore immediately began concentrating on supporting the rural women’s movement.

In 1978, she became a Professor at the *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana* (UAM) [Autonomous Metropolitan University], where, with a large team, she studied the various development processes in Mexico and their effects on the elite, the middle classes and the slum dwellers. In 1979, during this research phase, her son Omar was born. She took him with her to all her research areas. Only when her daughter Eréndira was born in 1981, Úrsula did take a break. Two children in the midst of the difficult living conditions of the rural people and the slum dwellers—not even she could manage that. But instead of taking a rest, she became very ill and

probably would have died without an unusual natural medicine supplied by traditional monks. Colleagues and friends helped her during this time so that she could continue with her research despite all these difficult circumstances and maintain her children.

Úrsula recovered and became stronger and more active than ever. Two more books appeared: *Piedras en el Surco* [Stones in the Groove (1983)] and also *Campesinos Protagonistas de su Historia* [Peasants Protagonists of their History (1986)]. The latter was a comprehensive study of the autonomous farmers' movement in the irrigated agricultural empire in Sonora, a movement that had helped to raise former day-labourers out of poverty and to help them sort out their lives. At the same time, the book described an alternative model for a just rural economy.

As described above, the struggles of the poor met with opposition from the government. First taxes and interest rates, which were already too high, were raised, and then the farmers were forced to give back their land to the former landowners by the Supreme Court. But in the long run, the government did not gain anything by this, because now landless farmers flooded the cities and the slum areas grew. Alongside her research, Úrsula gave practical support to these huge peoples' movements.

She was especially impressed by the indigenous migrant women, who survived under atrocious conditions—they had no income and no roof over their heads, they ate half-rotten remains of vegetables that had been left behind after markets, as well as rats, mice, cats and dogs, but they never gave up. For themselves and for their children, these women fought for housing programmes, demanded protection against gangs of violent youths, cooked what little food there was in common and in this way created solidarity and a community spirit. Úrsula and others helped where they could. They helped get preschool programmes up and running, so that small children did not run wild but were able to learn social skills and so be more easily integrated into the primary school system. They helped to obtain the necessary food for these children and set up programmes for healthy eating. A book came out of this too: *Estrategias de Supervivencia en la Ciudad de México* (1991) [Survival Strategies in Mexico City].

At the same time, the policies of the Mexican Government and of the IMF were critically assessed by Ursula; they were doing nothing to alleviate the conditions—in fact, they were making them worse. These negative processes were aggravated by the oil boom in Tabasco and examined in the book *El Impacto de Diconsa y alternativas de abasto para los grupos marginales rurales y urbanos del sureste* (1988) [The impact of Diconsa and alternatives for rural and urban marginal groups in southeast]. As with everywhere else in the world, the distribution of food in Mexico was being taken over by big business—Wal-Mart, Carrefour et al.—and this led to undernourishment and obesity.

She acquired a growing understanding of the fine details of how a patriarchally structured economy, closely entwined with political interests, comes to destroy new community-oriented, just economic and agricultural models, to poison the environment and to pursue its own interests through warfare and internal repression if necessary. This did not make her give up—rather it motivated her to even more strenuous efforts. From her biography, one sometimes gets the impression that there was not just one Úrsula but a whole bunch of Úrsulas, all in one person. Her scarcely believable range of activities is overwhelming.

Alongside all the activities mentioned above, together with publishing books and articles and practical support for the oppressed and the disenfranchised, she began to investigate international and national conflicts. She took part in world peace conferences, coordinated peace commissions and wrote not only about the mechanisms of destruction but also about alternative solutions for peace. She was Elected President of IPRA in Durban in 1998 and took part in consultations on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, between Spain and ETA and in Central America. She also helped widows in Burundi who had survived the genocide—many of them had lost their children—with processes of peace and healing. Here as elsewhere, she operates on several levels: the researcher gathers the necessary information about the wider context, and the courageous and politically oriented woman with the highest level of self-confidence gets involved at the highest levels of negotiation, all this with the greatest empathy and compassion. And, being a mother herself, she knows there is also a need for practical help.

In 1992, she becomes the Mexican Ombudswoman for the Environment. Later, in 1994, she even becomes Minister of the Environment in the Government of the State of Morelos. She has wells drilled to provide clean water, initiates the planting of thirty million trees, orders air quality to be tested and institutes measures to prevent accidents and poisoning in industrial areas. These achievements too were later thwarted by the state government, and it was painful for Úrsula to watch as so many of her achievements were lost.

After the turn of the century, she continues her research on such important themes as how climate change and environmental disasters impact on humankind and on how the privatisation of the water supply can be prevented—a danger that has now also reached Europe—and what gender differences have to do with the prevention of the fatal consequences of such events.

As always, Úrsula continues to teach at all levels, in universities as well as in slums. Sometimes she even spends her holidays giving talks to indigenous peoples, being who she is, the never-tiring ambassador of a better world. Her life is sometimes dangerous, and she pushes herself to the limit like no other. But within all the turmoil, she has created her small private paradise in Mexico. Once, she lived with peacocks, horses and a whole animal farm; today, she has cut down a little, but

guests are still greeted by a friendly gang of rescued street dogs, charmed by geese and cats and surrounded by beautiful exotic sweet-smelling plants—not to forget her Moorish-dome house, filled to the hilt with books.

Mother Earth is her home, and she protects Mother Earth as well as she can.

Zürich, Switzerland  
July 2016

Birgit Dechmann<sup>1</sup>



My meeting during Christmas time in Zürich with Birgit and Manfred Dechmann and their son Caspar. *Source* Personal photograph collection of the author

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Heide-Birgit Dechmann is a sociologist, psychologist and psychotherapist specialising in the therapy of couples, trauma and bodywork in Zürich. She teaches on training courses for therapists and gives speeches at international conferences, her main theme being the forgotten art of creating deep love in long-lasting relationships. She has published several books in German: with Christiane Ryffel: *Soziologie im Alltag*, 1st edition 1980, 16th edition 2014; with Christiane Ryffel: *Vom Ende zum Anfang der Liebe*, 1st edition 2001, 7th edition 2015; with Elisabeth Schlumpf: *Lieben ein Leben lang*, 1st edition 2008, 2nd edition 2009.

# Acknowledgements

This book is a product of collegial cooperation and thinking, which enabled me to finish the present manuscript, search for photographs and separate the abundant material into two books: the present more general one as a pioneer volume and the other focusing on peace and security issues.

Of all the collaborators, I would like to thank first Hans Günter Brauch, who, as the Editor of this series on *Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering and Practice* (PAHSEP), has been a tireless and continuous promoter of this book. With multiple discussions and diverse changes, this final version has finally been accomplished, thanks to the enormous number of painstaking hours he dedicated to previous versions and to the final edition of this work. I am also deeply honoured to be among the other very distinguished authors in this series of pioneering scientists and practitioners who have dedicated their life and intellectual effort to achieving and transmitting a better world for gender equity, equality, peace, security and nonviolent conflict resolution. Many thanks, Hans Günter Brauch.

Additional thanks go to Vanessa Greatorex, who transformed my ‘Spanglish’ drafts into correct British English. Although this sometimes meant the loss of poetic Spanish expressions, her adjustments convey the key message of each chapter clearly. Many thanks for your support in this enterprise.

I am also deeply indebted to Miguel Ángel Paredes Rivera, who transformed draft diagrams into beautiful figures, patiently corrected errors and made adjustments until the figures were finally as I wanted. Thank you, Ángel, for all your hard work.

I also deeply appreciate the support I have received from Dr. Margarita Velázquez Gutierrez, Director of the *Centre for Regional Multidisciplinary Research* at the *National Autonomous University of Mexico* (CRIM-UNAM). I am also grateful to many unnamed colleagues from different parts of the world, and to the peasant women and environmentalists who stimulated my theoretical thinking and gave me critical insights, which helped develop my ideas.

Without doubt, the multiple discussions during lunch hours with my daughter, Eréndira, and often long telephone and face-to-face discussions with my son, Omar, enriched my own thinking and sharpened the arguments presented in this book. Within the *International Peace Research Association (IPRA)*, the *Latin American Council for Peace Research (CLAIP)* and the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* community and other international networks, I was gradually able to achieve greater clarity regarding the complex relationships between environment, mental health, physiological threats, conflicts, war and peaceful behaviour. Many thanks go to all these often anonymous persons who have helped to improve the quality of this book.

Without doubt, Birgit Dechman and her deceased husband Manfred, together with Rudolf Strahm, were crucial to a critical understanding of the development process and the present complex relationships between people in the Global North and South.

Finally, I owe special thanks to Rodolfo Stavenhagen, who 45 years ago invited me to teach for six months in Mexico, the fascinating country where I found finally my home and my identity.

Cuernavaca, Mexico  
February 2018

Úrsula Oswald Spring



An informal dinner at my home in Cuernavaca with Rodolfo Stavenhagen in February 2016, ten months before he passed away, with the leader of the *Farmers' University of the South (UNICAM)* Emilio Plutarcho Garcia and two UNICAM activists and Hans Günter Brauch. *Source* The author's personal photograph collection

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# Abbreviations

16PF	Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Model
ABC	Assessment of biospheric changes
ADM	Archer Daniels Midland
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Banrural	National Bank of Rural Credit
BCE	Before Christ Era
BOD	Biological oxygen demand
Btu	British thermal units
BUAP	Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla
BUD	Billion USD (1000 millions)
CA	Amphetamines with/without cannabis
CAH	Cannabis, amphetamines, hallucinogens
Canacindra	National Chamber of Industry
CAOH	Cannabis, amphetamines, opiates, with/without hallucinogens
CBDR	Common but also differentiated responsibilities
Cc	Centre of the centre
CC	Climate change
CCE	Business Coordinating Council
CEESTEM	Third World Studies Centre
Cenapred	National Council on Disaster Management
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEPAL	See ECLAT
CFC	Chlorofluorocarbons
CH	Cannabis, hallucinogens
CICC	Intergovernmental Coordination on Climate Change
CIESAS	Research Centre and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology

CINVESTAV	Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados of the National
CISINAH	Centro de Investigaciones Superiores del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [Centre of Superior Research of the National Institute of Anthropology and History]
CIVAC	Industrial Zone of the Valley of Cuernavaca
CLAIP	Latin American Peace Research Council
CLOC	Latin American Peasant Council
Cn	Centre of the peripheral nation in the Third World
CNC	National Peasant Confederation
CNPA	Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala) [National Coordination Plan Ayala]
CNPP	National Confederation of Small Property
COA	Cannabis, opiates, amphetamines
Coalition	Coalition of the Collective Ejidos of the Valleys of the Yaqui and Mayo
COH	Cannabis, opiates, hallucinogens
CONACYT	National Council for Science and Technology
Conagua	National Commission of Water (Comisión Nacional de Agua)
Concamin	Confederation of Industrial Chambers
Concanaco	Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce
Coneval	National Council for Evaluation of Poverty
COPLADET	State Committee on Planning for Development in Tabasco (Comité de Planeación para el Desarrollo del Estado de Tabasco)
CP	Cannabis (pure)
Cr	Centre of the region (state)
CRAC	Regional Coordination of Communitarian Authorities (Coodinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias)
CRIM-UNAM	Centre for Regional Multidisciplinary Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico
CSD	United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
DDT	Diclorodifeniltricloroetano
Diconsa	Distributor of Popular Goods (Distribuidoras Conasupo, S. A. de C.V.)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DRM	Disaster risk management
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
E	Extroversion
EAP	Economically active population
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Ensanut MC	National Health and Nutrition Survey Medium Term
ENSANUT	National Health and Nutrition Survey



ENSO	El Niño Southern Oscillation
EOLSS	Encyclopaedia on Life Support Systems
EPC	Ecology and Peace Commission in IPRA
EPI	Eysenck Personality Inventory
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna [Basque Homeland and Liberty]
ETHZ	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich
EZLN	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [Zapatist Army of National Liberation] in Chiapas, Mexico
FAO	UN Food and Agricultural Organisation
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FPI	Freiburger Persönlichkeits Inventar [Freiburg Personality Inventory]
FPI 1	Nervousness
FPI 2	Aggressiveness
FPI 3	Depression
FPI 4	Excitability
FPI 5	Sociability
FPI 6	Tranquillity
FPI 7	Striving for dominance
FPI 8	Self-consciousness
FPI 9	Openness
FPIM	Subordinate masculinity scale
FRELIMO	Mozambican Liberation Front
FSS	Food system and society
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GDP	Gross domestic product
GECHS	Global Environmental Change and Human Security
GIS	Geographic information system
GMO	Genetically modified organism
HC	Heavy consumption of cannabis
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
HP	Hallucinogens (includes synthetic drugs) (pure)
HUD	US Department of Housing and Urban Development
HUGE	Human, gender and environmental security and peace
ICA	Water quality index
IEA	International Energy Association
IER	Institute for Renewable Energy at UNAM
IFA	Agrochemicals
IFIAS	International Federation of Institutes for Advanced Science
IHME	Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMCE	Mexican Institute of Foreign Trade
IMF	International Monetary Fund

INEGI	National Institute for Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía)
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPN	National Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico Nacional)
IPRA	International Peace Research Association
IQ	Intelligence quotient
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
IRIPAZ	Instituto de Relaciones Internacionales para la Paz [Institute of International Relations for Peace]
IRWM	Integrated river water management
ISIS	Islamic State
KFE	Kommission für Entwicklungsländer [Commission of Studies for Developing Countries]
LAN	National Water Law (Ley de Aguas Nacionales)
LC	Light consumption
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning and others
LSD	Lysergic acid
M	Masculinity
MA	Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
MAMC	Metropolitan Area of Mexico City
mbd	Million barrels/day
MC	Medium consumption
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MERCOSUR	Common Market of South America (Mercado Común Sur)
MMPI	Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory
MMQ	Multifactorial Memory Questionnaire
MMT	Million metric tons
MNC	Multinational companies
MST	Landless Movement in Brazil
MUP	Urban popular movement
MVMC	Metropolitan Valley of Mexico City
N	Emotional lability
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NC	Non-consumers
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OAS	Organisation of the Americas
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAHSEP	Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering and Practice

PAN	Party of the National Action
Pc	Periphery of the centre (workers in industrialised countries)
PEMEX	Mexican Oil Company (Petróleos Mexicanos)
PINCC	Mexican Research Program on Climate Change
PISA assessment	Programme for International Student Assessment
Pn	Periphery of the peripheral nation in cities
Pr	Periphery of the region (small cities and rural areas)
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party
PROECO	Mexican Ombudswoman for the Environment
PROFEPA	Federal Office of the General Attorney of Environment
PRONAES	National Programme for University Education (Programa Nacional de Educación Superior)
RCP	Representative concentration pathway
RETAC-CONACYT	Thematic Network on Water of the National Council of Science and Technology
SAM	Mexican Food System
SAPAS	Water Supply and Sewerage of the State of Tlaxcala
SARH	Mexican Ministry of Agriculture
SAS	Food and Society System
SAS	Sistema alimentario y sociedad: el caso mexicano (see FSS)
Scale 6	Serenity
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEDAM	Ministry for Environmental Development in Morelos
Segob	Ministry of Interior
Semarnap	Ministry of Environment
Semarnat-INE	National Institute of Ecology
Sener	Ministry of Energy
SHCP	Ministry of Finances
SINTACS	Method for groundwater vulnerability and pollution risk assessment in highly anthropised regions
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
THC	Tetrahydrocannabinol
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UABJO	Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca
UAC	Universidad Autónoma de Campeche
UAdeC	Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila Antonio Narro
UAEM	Autonomous University of the State of Morelos
UAG	Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero
UAM	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana [Autonomous Metropolitan University]
UAM-A	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad [Unity] Azcapozalco
UAM-I	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad [Unity] Iztapalapa

UAM-RG	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, [General Rector] Rectoría General
UAM-X	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad [Unity] Xochimilco
UAT	Universidad Autónoma de Tabasco [Autonomous University of Tabasco]
UCEZ	La Unión de Comuneros Emiliano Zapata [Communitarian Unión Emiliano Zapata]
UKM	National University of Malaysia
UN	United Nations
UNACH	Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas [Autonomous University of Chiapas]
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [National Autonomous University of Mexico]
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDOC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICAM	Universidad Campesina del Sur [University of Peasantry in the South)
Unicam-Sur	Peasant University of the South
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNO	United Nations Organisation
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNU-EHS	United Nations University's Institute on Environment and Human Security in Bonn
UPOEG	Union of the Villages and Organisations of the State of Guerrero (Unión de Pueblos y Organizaciones del Estado de Guerrero)
USA	United States of America
USD	US dollar
USDA	US Department for Agriculture
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WB	World Bank
WDR	World Disaster Report
WECF	Women Engage for Common Future
WEF	World Economic Forum

WGDEA	Working Group on Development and Environment in the Americas
WHO	World Health Organisation
WMO	World Meteorological Organisation
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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