

Filemón, Brick Maker, Oaxaca, Mexico

by Carmen Roca

Filemón has made bricks for a living for the last 8 years, after many years of working in construction and moving from city to city in the South of Mexico, where he earned the nickname “ Rambo” because of his strength and quick temper. He works from home, in the front yard, where he collects the clay and other inputs needed for the brick mix, prepares the mix, molds the bricks, leaving them to dry in the sun before stacking them up in neat rows for sale. This allows him to watch over his little 2-year old son, Pablo, the joy of his life, while his wife Eva makes *tortillas* to sell close to where they rent a tin-house and yard.



Filemon, photo by Carmen Roca

Builders come to buy the bricks piled up in the yard. The economy in Oaxaca is very dependent on foreign tourism and on remittances from the US. The swine-flu this year, and the financial crisis, affected the Oaxacan economy severely in the last months. For the first time in years, Rambo had to quit brick-making to look for other sources of income. He had already lost money on the materials for the brick mix that were going bad in his yard, as there were no customers for the bricks that were ready to be sold. Filemon found work cleaning land for construction and building shelters for poultry and pigs at local farms. Little Pablo had to go under the care of a niece in order for Eva to sell *elotes* and *tortillas*. When brick sales re-started, little Pablo fell ill with pneumonia and Rambo had to take 4 days to stay with him at the hospital. Fortunately, Rambo had earlier enrolled his wife and children in Seguro Popular (public insurance scheme for low-income persons operated and funded by the Government of Mexico) which helped him get the services he required for Pablo at the local hospital. But Rambo had to pay for the medicines, which Pablo is still taking. Pablo is now recovering at home, and Rambo is trying to catch up with selling and making bricks. He has to make up for the

days of income lost. Juan, their older son, starts school again soon after summer break. Rambo feels they are doing well as they already purchased some of the books, coloring pencils, and notebooks that Juan needs for school. But Rambo will have to wait a few weeks before buying sneakers for Juan to wear to school. With the economic downturn, one thousand fired bricks – which used to sell for 1,300 pesos (USD 100 approximately) - now sell for only 1,100 pesos (USD 85 approximately) with difficulty: meanwhile, the price of materials remains the same. When construction came to a halt in Oaxaca, the local brick-makers in the neighborhood had accumulated around 200,000 bricks waiting to be sold.