



JUNE 18, 2020

THE COVID-19 CRISIS: CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES IN MEXICO AND ALONG THE BORDER

OVERVIEW

An hour-long webinar on “[The COVID-19 Crisis: Civil Society Responses in Mexico and Along the Border](#)” was hosted by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University on June 18, 2020, co-organized with the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. A group of development practitioners and leaders who focus on Mexico were invited to **explore how the COVID-19 pandemic intersects with the long-standing humanitarian crisis around the borderlands between the United States, Mexico, and the northern**

triangle countries of Central America.

Three panelists shared insights on how civil society and faith-inspired organizations are responding to the pandemic, considered new programs and partnerships, and highlighted the immediate and long-term challenges and possibilities of the coronavirus crisis.

Panelists were Dina Buchbinder Auron, founder of Education for Sharing; Benjamin Laniado, secretary general of CADENA, a humanitarian relief agency; and Jorge Vivanco, president of Zukara, a natural food company, and longtime chair of the World Vision Mexico Board and VisionFund Mexico. Katherine Marshall, senior fellow at the Berkley Center and executive director of WFDD, moderated

the discussion. The webinar was the sixth in a [series of conversations](#) focused on faith engagement in the COVID-19 crisis and response, organized by the “[Religious Responses to COVID-19](#)” project. A video recording and transcript are available on the [Berkley Center website](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mexico faces a triple crisis with the COVID-19 emergency coming alongside widespread endemic poverty and frequent natural disasters. Large segments of the population suffer acutely.
- Closing borders to arrest COVID-19 infection hits the large population on the move (estimated at several hundred thousand people) hard.
- Public and non-profit organizations are responding well to the migrants they can reach, in camps and communities, but many are hidden from view and their situations are largely unknown.
- Large-scale mobilization by civil society reflects rapid learning and adapting. Coordination among efforts is working well in large measure because solid mechanisms were established before the current crisis.
- While many civil society and religious communities can adapt and respond, many others without resources are forced to close.
- Humanitarian aid focused first on supporting hospitals, second on elderly

populations, and third on families.

- Well-adapted programs build on collaboration and knowledge of vulnerabilities and include support for shut-in older people and families.
- Data on trends in widespread violence are poor, but signs point to increases. Mental health needs are great and rising and demand attention now and post-crisis.
- Creative responses to the crisis offer both hope and pointers for future action and reforms.
- Now is the time for leadership and action: If not now, when?

INTRODUCTION: SITUATION IN MEXICO AND ALONG THE BORDER

Multiple vulnerabilities: This is a multi-hazard problem, with multiple vulnerabilities. In Mexico, there are always systemic risks. The most vulnerable people now face more challenges: extreme poverty, no work, and natural risks. (Benjamin Laniado)

Total interconnectedness: This is the pandemic of pandemics, with the COVID-19 crisis triggering and exacerbating other dire situations like poverty, violence, and so many people who lag behind in critical ways. For the first time, we are fully aware of the realities of total interconnectedness and what it implies. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

Migration flows: When the COVID-19 outbreak began in March, the Mexican

authorities announced actions to try to stop the large migration flows from the southern border and along the northern border. There are two big stories about what is happening. One is that more official channels are supporting people, through the public hospitals and other public entities. The tragedy is that the thousands of people who do not reach these shelters and are somewhere, trying to survive. (Jorge Vivanco)

ISSUES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY AND FAITH-INSPIRED ORGANIZATIONS

Providing the basics: With COVID-19, the scope of needed action is huge and now includes the basics like safety, food, clean water, shelter, and psychosocial support.... Faith-based organizations have huge challenges and play a very central place in the COVID-19 outbreak. Their strength is above all in drawing on communities and networks. (Benjamin Laniado)

Reinventing in face of crisis: Most organizations have had to reinvent themselves more quickly than they could have imagined. A positive aspect of the crisis is that it makes us change: Crisis opens opportunities, pushing us to the limit, to go beyond, to move forward, to challenge the status quo. Many organizations, however, have not been able to survive. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

Setting priorities: Many NGOs involved in the COVID-19 response focus on children. World Vision's main activities in recent years have been focused on advocacy, with child protection as our first priority. During COVID-19, the top priority is keeping

keep families together. Second is health, including mental health. Third is keeping children active. (Jorge Vivanco)

New ways of thinking: Chronic poverty in Mexico gives a strong foundation for new COVID-linked partnerships. All problems are magnified, set against the basic situation where half the population lives in poverty. Agendas and strategic approaches have had to shift from "normal" humanitarian ways of doing things. (Benjamin Laniado)

Coordination as key: Coordination mechanisms, established before the crisis, work well; UNHCR plays a strong and positive role in Mexico, along with WHO, UNICEF, and many religious organizations including World Vision. (Jorge Vivanco)

GREATEST NEEDS DURING COVID-19

Elderly and health care: In our mapping of the neediest people, for us first of all were old people. Needs for psychosocial work around the world are also huge, and needs for mental health care after the COVID-19 crisis will be vast. Medical orientation is important because people in Mexico don't know when to go to the hospital, so people die in their houses.... Doctors and all those who work in hospitals and shelters are the heroes of this story. Supplying PPE to them is an urgent humanitarian need. (Benjamin Laniado)

Child abuse: Children lived with violence and abuse at home before the COVID-19 crisis, but that is now exacerbated because parents are more stressed out. Uncertainty is at its peak. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Accompanying the elderly: CADENA's program for the elderly focuses on companionship. An older person who does not have family or anybody that can take care of them has a companion who engages him or her every day, to make sure that he or she is okay and to prevent depression, sickness, and death. The government is replicating it at a national level. (Benjamin Laniado)

Psychosocial support: CADENA's call center project helps families all over Mexico. You can call or join by a bot in WhatsApp. Hundreds of professional volunteers receive calls and give psychosocial support. Spiritual leaders from all the religions—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist—give support from a spiritual perspective. (Benjamin Laniado)

Supporting families: Education for Sharing focuses on how to better serve families at home, providing resources that are practical, fun, meaningful, and healthy, offering an environment that is most propitious and better geared towards providing a sense of resilience. Most parents are not used to spending so much time with their children and often don't know what to do with them. We need to acknowledge this reality and be nimble in providing what parents can use today. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

Migrants and refugees: World Vision programs play major roles in supporting migrant and refugee populations. (Jorge Vivanco)

Working together: Positive examples of partnerships where complementary skills and knowledge are involved include Alma, an NGO in Mexico, and CADENA.

CADENA has provided over 14,000 items of equipment for hospitals in Mexico. The program is based on Alma's help in providing maps of the hospital system, drawing on mutual trust. (Benjamin Laniado)

Coordinating faith responses: Strong coordination can improve decisions affecting large communities. For example, from one day to the next, all schools, community centers, synagogues, and every space where people meet in the Jewish community closed, but they also were able to reinforce the community with online activities: concerts, events, and conferences. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Creative leadership: Leadership is the key. The real leader is the one who can make things happen. We need leaders who think out of the box, creatively, bringing realistic and different solutions, reinventing and resetting our ways of doing things. Commitment is critical. This crisis will be with us for a long time, so the commitment of leaders to changing realities has to be strong. (Benjamin Laniado)

Resilience is key: This is my message to all: We need to be resilient. And to be resilient, we have to be adaptable. (Benjamin Laniado)

Listen to vulnerable people: I ask from leaders in governments that they look more closely and truly take into account what people actually go through and their needs. This can help them understand better why people comply or not with public policies. Half of Mexico's population works in the informal sector. If they don't go out, if they stay at home, they will die of hunger.

They live by the day. Systemic policies that balance health and economic aspects is how to meet people's needs. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

Rethinking our priorities: There is a phrase that I often think about during this COVID-19 crisis: “the world is pregnant with opportunity.” It’s about the possibility of reinventing the “system of systems.” This crisis is inviting us, pushing us, to really rethink, reimagine, and reprioritize what it is that we truly care about as humans on planet Earth. (Dina Buchbinder Auron)

Potential of teamwork: We have to come to an analysis of the basics, and to reconsider the potential of collaboration and the potential of teamwork. I know that these two subjects are used constantly, everywhere: teamwork and collaboration. But believe me, we have seen results that show the enormous potential that humankind has if we really work together. (Jorge Vivanco)

Reviewing core values: The world needs now to focus on core values. We all have to review our own values, in our homes, in our jobs, in our ministries. If we don't do it now, we will never do it. (Jorge Vivanco)

Religious Responses to COVID-19 Project

“The COVID-19 Crisis: Civil Society Response in Mexico and Along the Border” event was sponsored by the “[Religious Responses to COVID-19](#)” project. The project, launched in March 2020 as a collaborative effort between the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, the World Faiths Development Dialogue, and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, explores the responses of religious actors to the COVID-19 pandemic and organizes information so that it can be quickly found and used by development policymakers and practitioners and religious actors who seek to work together in the COVID-19 response. Through a series of events, publications, and the establishment of an evolving [online resource repository](#), the project draws upon the experience and insights of experts on global health and formal and informal religious leaders as the foundation for further strategic reflections towards a positive path ahead.

About this Brief

This brief highlights contributions to a June 18, 2020 Berkley Center webinar on “The COVID-19 Crisis: Civil Society Responses in Mexico and Along the Border,” drawing on the insights of development practitioners. The goal is to highlight how civil society and faith-inspired organizations are responding to the crisis and to provide direction for future action in Mexico.

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EVENT PARTICIPANTS



Dina Buchbinder Auron is a Mexican social entrepreneur who has introduced an innovative, action-oriented international education model called Education for Sharing (E4S) to systems that have long struggled with passivity and rigidity. Auron is a Schusterman Fellow, Edmundo Hillary Fellow, Ashoka Fellow, and an emerita member of the board of directors of the International Youth Foundation.



Katherine Marshall is a senior fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, where she leads the center’s work on religion and global development, and a professor of the practice of development, conflict, and religion in the Walsh School of Foreign Service. She helped to create and now serves as the executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue.



Benjamin Laniado is the secretary general of CADENA, a global Jewish humanitarian relief agency based in Mexico City. CADENA works to reduce the impact of natural disasters in vulnerable communities.



Jorge Vivanco is the president of Zukara, a company developing natural and healthy food. He is involved in a number of other entrepreneurial and charitable enterprises including Ahimsa Fund, where he served as board president for three years. He served as board chair of World Vision Mexico and VisionFund Mexico.

For additional event content, see <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events>.