

‘Reconstruction must be done from a human rights perspective, which means reactivating communities, rather than just building houses’

Two earthquakes that hit Mexico in September 2017 left hundreds dead and thousands injured, and civil society was quick to respond. As well as having immediate impacts, the earthquakes exposed severe shortcomings in governance. CIVICUS speaks to two people from Fundar: Analysis and Research Centre - Eduardo Alcalá, Coordinator of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Sarahí Salvatierra, researcher of the Accountability and Anti-Corruption Programme. Fundar is a plural and independent Mexican civil society organisation that promotes substantive democracy and the transformation of power relations between government and society. Fundar undertakes advocacy work through the production and dissemination of specialised knowledge, the promotion of critical and proactive reflection and experimentation and the establishment of links with civil, social and governmental actors.



1. Do you think the government’s response to the September 2017 earthquakes in Mexico was adequate and sufficient?

On 7 September 2017, an 8.2 magnitude earthquake severely affected the population of the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Soon afterwards, on 19 September, another 7.1 magnitude earthquake caused serious damage, mainly in Mexico City and in the states of Guerrero, Mexico, Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala and Veracruz. The earthquakes provided evidence of

several shortcomings regarding the prevention of and response to the effects of natural disasters, which the Mexican government should urgently address.

From our perspective, the official response to these events should include the following elements. First, it should ensure the dissemination of accessible, clear, accurate and high-quality information. This is decisive for the first response, that is, for adequately rolling out the rescue of survivors, their care and the recovery of their assets. It is also key to tackle the reconstruction of survivors' homes and of their communities' infrastructure, to provide living conditions that are appropriate to their needs after the disaster, and ultimately to provide reparation for the damages and guarantee other rights. In this sense, it is clear that official information and communication systems and platforms must be updated urgently to offer complete data that allow for instant knowledge of the magnitude of damages, the types of emergency assistance required by and sent to affected populations and, above all, the strategies that are planned and the origin and destination of the public resources with which the government responds to the catastrophe in the short, medium and long term. In the case of the recent earthquakes, the government's responses to information needs did not meet these minimum transparency standards for natural disasters.

Second, the official response must take account of the fact that during the emergency phase, citizen participation, undertaken out of solidarity and willingness to help, gets organised and coordinated in a natural and virtuous manner. In that sense, the actions undertaken by communities in Mexico to address the emergency phase were evidently more timely and effective than official strategies. [Social media](#) enabled a community response that was much more agile and efficient than bureaucratic processes. Although it helped keep order in some respects during this phase, the involvement of the government through the navy, army and public agencies also frequently generated confusion and resulted in policy measures not necessarily in accordance with international protocols regarding the rescue of survivors and the preservation of people's lives.

Third, the government's response must include citizen participation in decision-making towards reconstruction. Strategies and interventions must be designed and implemented in accordance with the highest human rights standards. Participation not only empowers communities but also ensures greater coherence between policies and the priorities of communities. In this regard, it is vital that the Mexican government enables, promotes and implements effective citizen participation mechanisms for the design of reconstruction plans and, more generally, to strengthen dialogue with citizens on a permanent basis.

Fourth, the government's response must be accompanied by adequate accountability mechanisms, based on effective information platforms and systems, so that it becomes possible to monitor in real time both the physical progress and financial aspects of reconstruction plans. Likewise, the government must be willing to reorient its actions and adjust investment decisions to redirect funding towards the most pressing needs, on the basis of a short, medium and long-term strategic vision. At this point, the Mexican government should introduce substantive improvements in the design, implementation and operation of accountability and citizen control mechanisms. Citizens should be able to

monitor reconstruction processes in all their dimensions, including physical and financial, and including the disbursement of both public resources and resources from private donations. The current regulatory framework is not very robust in this respect and its procedural shortcomings make adequate supervision difficult.

2. What role did civil society play in this context?

Civil society has been active on all these issues for years. First, various organisations have worked to place the need for better urban and housing planning at the centre of public debate, along with the need for an integral design in the area of civil protection and risk prevention. Second, in the face of disasters such as earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes and floods, civil society has contributed through the provision of information and the implementation of participatory mechanisms to address the specific needs of affected communities. Third, through various civic platforms and citizen initiatives, civil society has been involved and applied its expertise on different areas to improve processes in the aftermath of a catastrophe.

So, although volunteering has been one of the most visible faces of civil society in the moments immediately following the earthquakes, our presence has far exceeded it. Civil society has promoted the analysis and discussion of approaches to reconceptualise the notion of wellbeing for people affected by a natural disaster. We know that 'rebuilding for rebuilding's sake' is worthless; we need to rebuild on the basis of a human rights perspective. This means not just building houses but also reactivating communities, promoting development in a way that fits each population's needs, prioritising the requirements of the most vulnerable groups and, in sum, ensuring better living conditions in order to be prepared for similar events in the future.

In short, we have specialised knowledge and experience to spare, and the government should recognise this by promoting a fluid dialogue and adopting concrete commitments with civil society. All this, however, requires great political and administrative will, and it will hardly happen unless we raise our demands. Getting the government to adapt its mechanisms to the available opportunities for improvement and to our observations and recommendations is the main challenge we face. Just as with any other advocacy process for structural change, this will not be easy. It will take a permanent and long-term effort, throughout which we should never lose sight of the principles and practices of public information, participation and accountability. Only to the extent that we do our watchdog duty will we be able to improve democratic processes and ensure higher levels of human welfare for our citizens.

3. Did the earthquakes reveal other long-standing underlying problems? Has the emergency opened any window of opportunity for the resolution of these problems?

The earthquakes confirmed the existence of structural and procedural failures, as well as the need to strengthen controls and accountability throughout implementation and procurement processes, including in bidding and contracting. The mapping of the most affected communities has made it clear that these had greater vulnerabilities and suffered greater inequalities long before the earthquakes hit. Similarly, it has been observed that women are the main victims of disasters, while women also had an unprecedentedly [prominent role](#) in the first response following the recent earthquakes. So this is an ideal opportunity to tackle those problems, vulnerabilities and inequalities from their root. The Mexican government should not waste this opportunity. It must improve the conceptualisation and design of the normative and procedural framework on the basis of human rights principles and standards. It must also transform the institutional practices through which it implements its actions and spends public resources. In that sense, the earthquakes have opened a window of opportunity, which the government must take advantage of, to launch a strategy of collaboration with civil society.

Decision-making toward these aims would contribute to addressing not only the immediate issue of the response to emergencies but also several other problems that cut through the public agenda: the lack of transparency and accountability, inequality, corruption, human rights violations and impunity.

4. Have novel initiatives by civil society emerged in this critical context?

Several novel initiatives have emerged. One of them is the [#Epicentro](#) platform, made up of civil society, academic and business organisations, as well as volunteers. With the motto "Social reconstruction with integrity," #Epicentro emerged from an initiative by 10 core organisations, which after a few days became 30 and over the past weeks increased to over 100. Fundar is part of this initiative, which seeks to promote citizen participation in the various phases of reconstruction, demanding the highest transparency and accountability standards from the Mexican government. Attention to reconstruction is key because it takes much more time and resources than the emergency itself: it has been estimated that reconstruction will take three years and cost about 30 billion pesos (approx. US\$ 1.6 billion), much of which will come from the private sector. Over such a long period media attention will decline, and given the amounts of cash involved, lack of oversight is likely to have enormous costs. In this particular case, the period of reconstruction will overlap with the upcoming electoral process that will take place in 2018, and it will therefore be necessary to minimise the risk of a political and clientelistic use of the resources meant for reconstruction.

The #Epicentro coalition is organised into three thematic nodes. The first is in charge of doing a thorough follow-up to ensure that resources for reconstruction are spent correctly and reach those who really need them. The second node's task is to monitor that reconstruction is carried out according to best practices, human rights standards and lessons learned from experience. The third focuses on the issue of reparations for damages owed to corruption victims and on the need to hold those responsible for them accountable. In that respect, it is particularly important to investigate why people died as the result of the

collapse of buildings that had legal construction permits that probably should never have been granted.

In short, #Epicentro represents a long-term citizen commitment. The format of the platform, designed by young specialists on civic technologies, is innovative compared to the Mexican experience of building citizen monitoring networks, alliances and initiatives, not only because of the number of organisations and volunteers involved and their diversity and thematic and technical complementarity, but also because of the degree of coordination achieved around a common goal.

5. Has Mexico received enough solidarity and financial support from the international community? In what additional way could external actors support post-earthquake reconstruction?

After the earthquakes, we received lots of solidarity from the international community. Support ranged from humanitarian aid in kind and technical assistance for the rescue of survivors to a large flow of financial contributions collected from donations by various actors in the international community, both public and private.

The [Budget Transparency website](#) offers official information about the donations that the Mexican government has received from various countries and international organisations, including the United Nations Team Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC). However, the publication of information does not suffice to ensure that resources meet the needs of populations affected by natural disasters.

The plurality of international sources of resources increases the need for efficient instruments for their administration, guarantees of transparency in their execution and mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making and in monitoring to ensure that resources reach their target. Expressed as a mere amount, the flows of financial resources do not say much: in the shortest term, of course it is important that these funds do not end up in the wrong pockets. But in the long term, what really matters is that resources materialise in clear strategies and actions that ensure that reconstruction takes place on the basis of a human rights approach. In that sense, it would be important for the donors of funds to show interest in the destination of these resources and in the impact that they are having on the fulfilment of the aims to which they were destined.

- **Civic space in Mexico is rated as ‘repressed’ by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating serious restrictions in the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.**
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