

Build new, better lives

Solidarity is key to recovering from a disaster, as the experience of Mexican earthquake victims reveals

Early in the morning of 19 September 1985, at 7.19 am, Mexico suffered a magnitude 8.1 earthquake that damaged several parts of the country, affecting Mexico City the most.

In Mexico City the situation was catastrophic: around 50,000 people died and 100,000 were injured. In all, around 120,000 families became victims of the earthquake. Hundreds of schools, some of the main hospitals, many factories, offices and different facilities were severely damaged or collapsed.

Neighbourhoods around the centre of town were the main affected areas. So extensive was the damage to human life and property that the government entered a state of shock and did not know what to do.

But we, the victims, did not have the time to wait for the government to react. From the start we handled the situation on our own. In my neighbourhood, Tlatelolco, where more than 1,000 died, we began searching for survivors as soon as conditions allowed us to do so, that is, the instant the cloud of dust disappeared. By 8 am, we had already begun assembling different commissions of volunteers, to list the injured, the dead and the missing, to install shelters, and to search for medical aid.

When officials of the government showed up hours later, we were the ones who told them what to do and co-ordinated their activities. Around 500,000 volunteers were collaborating everywhere. In the beginning, our only tools were our own hands; only later did machinery and tools begin to arrive. By 9 am, we had the first shelters functioning. By noon, we began sending volunteers out to other areas to find out what was happening there. At 5

pm, we held the first assembly of the survivors. In the afternoon of the next day we had a meeting with local authorities where we presented our first list of demands. This meeting was abruptly interrupted by a second and powerful earthquake of magnitude 7.2.

The next few days were spent organizing shelters and camps, even as rescue work continued. One week later, we held our first demonstration, marching towards the President's house to demand solutions to our problems. That was when we had the first contact with ministers of the government. As an outcome of our meetings and assemblies, unions of victims and neighbours were formed in each of the affected neighbourhoods of the city.

When the government recovered its wits, it decided to follow the Nicaraguan government's policy for the victims of the Managua quake: to expel them to the outskirts of the city. We strongly opposed that policy and, in our assemblies, we resolved not to allow anyone to relocate us. So the tents and camps were built exactly in front of the collapsed or affected houses and buildings. We also began regular meetings with the elected representatives of the unions. On 23 October, we held a big demonstration at the main square of the city to demand that the government stop debt repayments and, instead, use that money for reconstruction.

Big demo

One day later, also in Tlatelolco, we held the foundation congress of the Co-ordinadora Unica de Damnificados (CUD), the co-ordination centre for the victims. Two days later we held another big demonstration outside the President's house, which forced him and some of his

ministers to meet us. That meeting led to a lot of other meetings with different ministers, who began to discuss our demands.

Meanwhile, the unions were organizing a lot of activities in each neighbourhood. The commissions had now enlarged to include social, technical, cultural, communication and womens issues. We began organizing large art festivals, in which both victims and well-known artists participated.

Several months later, on 13 May 1986, we finally signed with the Mexican government the Democratic Agreement for the Reconstruction. This document gave warranties to each one of the victims and gave birth to different housing programmes. An expropriation decree gave all victims equal rights, and private properties became the property of the State, to be developed as part of the reconstruction process. All the victims became inhabitants of the expropriated land. No matter what their status was before the quake whether they were owners or tenants, rich or poor—they all had the same rights. Thanks to the agreement, special consideration was given to the poorest, the elderly and widows.

Apart from focusing on housing reconstruction, we also began to work in

the fields of health, education, labour and culture. We established direct relationships with different agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both local and international, so that they could support us directly. Through different programmes, we got houses for all the victims and we ourselves built around 5,000 houses.

It was not easy, and we had to spend hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours, in negotiations, demonstrations, rallies, assemblies, press conferences, academic and social encounters, arts and sports activities, solidarity encounters and much more.

There are many lessons from our struggle. All solidarity was welcomed, as long as it was given unconditionally. We fought the battles on our own; we did not allow political parties or churches to represent us.

We worked for all the victims without exception, and we took care to ensure greater support for those more in need. The reconstruction process was handled in accordance with the needs and demands of the victims and not those of the government.


New future

The philosophy behind our reconstruction was not to go back to our past but to build a new and better future,

with the participation of everyone and for the benefit of all. The basic value that drove us was—and remains—solidarity.

There were other consequences of our movement. Existing laws were changed, and new ones created. A new generation of politicians, musicians, artists and poets, among others, was born. The people had won new rights. The political situation in Mexico City changed forever. So great was the influence of our movement that it got reflected all over the country.

Since then, we have tried to use our experience to help others who, like us, became the victims of disasters. We did it in El Salvador, in 1986, when a big quake struck, and in many other places, both in Mexico and abroad. As a result of contact with the victims of the great Hanshin quake in 1995 in Japan, a co-ordination network of local NGOs was born. That group of Japanese NGOs later consolidated into a network called the Citizens towards Overseas Disasters Emergencies (CODE). CODE (www.code-jp.org) has done a lot of work in disaster-hit areas in countries like Taiwan, Afghanistan, Iran, El Salvador, Mexico, Algeria and Turkey. Currently, we are developing relief activities and recovery projects in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

We hope that the victims of disasters can take advantage of our experience. If we can be helpful in any way, just let us know! Remember, the basic value is solidarity. We have to fight for all, without exception. The idea is not to rebuild but to build new and better lives! 

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Mexico

