No earthquake can topple Mexican solidarity

On September 19, 2017, Mexico was hit by a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that toppled buildings in Mexico City and four surrounding states. Only two hours earlier, I had left my meeting in a high-rise building to participate in the annual drill to commemorate the 1985 earthquake which struck on the same date 32 years ago. As part of the exercise, schools and office buildings were evacuated. Some people considered the simulation useful when the real thing hit. Sadly, others did not live to make that judgment. No matter how much survival training you go through, you never really know what is going to happen or how it will affect you.

The aftermath

In the aftermath of the 2017 earthquake we know that nearly 400 people died and 140,000 buildings were damaged. But through the darkness of mourning relatives and settling dust, the expressions of solidarity of thousands of Mexicans who hurried to the streets to help, shone brightly. Volunteers from all walks of life; young and old, ailing and able, neighbours
and strangers, all worked around the clock to lend a helping hand.

The quick response from the marines, army and government units was crucial. But what made the real difference were those first hours of bare hands and human chains, pulling out debris, sending water and mouth coverings to those who were affected. Whenever it was suspected that someone was trapped in the rubble, a hand was lifted for silence, to allow rescuers to listen for any calls for help amidst the pile of cement and twisted steel. In response, the hands of many others rose in unison. At the end of each day, the Mexican national anthem was sung to encourage the rescue efforts.

**Mexican solidarity**

At CIESC we have been mapping volunteer activity in Mexico for the past 20 years, starting in 2005 when the first National Survey on Solidarity and Volunteer Activity (Encuesta Nacional de Solidaridad y Acción Voluntaria, ENSAV) was conducted. The survey was repeated in 2012 and recently in 2016. The latest results show a rise in civic participation and volunteering activities over the past few years. In 2016, 83% of Mexicans over 15 years of age - almost 74 million people – positively answered the question: “Have you done something for others outside your family without being paid for it in the previous 12 months?”

We found that Mexicans volunteer indiscriminately. There is gender parity in reported volunteering rates, as confirmed through the 2005, 2012 and 2016 ENSAV surveys. Everyone lends a hand in different ways, irrespective of social and economic inequalities. My research on Mexican volunteerism shows that “People from different socioeconomic sectors in the country contribute in equal measure to acts of solidarity. This means that neither high-nor low income individuals engage in more acts of solidarity: neither do those with lower educational levels contribute more or less time and effort than those who are more educated.”

This was evident in the aftermath of the 2017 earthquake when people from all walks of life provided assistance through volunteering. Media reports talked of hundreds of thousands of citizens helping in Mexico City and the neighboring states of Morelos and Puebla. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of maximizing this important contribution in a productive and organized fashion. In Mexico, we have found that the proportion of volunteers working together in groups - both formal and informal ones - is growing. Volunteering through groups and associations rose from 24% in 2005, to 70% as reported in the 2016 national survey. Coordination of such groups is a difficult skill but critical to effective disaster response in times of
Volunteering towards recovery

Why do people participate and volunteer in natural disasters? An easy answer is that it would be inhuman not to do so. But volunteering is also a way in which we show solidarity with others, form meaningful relationships, and work to create a better world. After the 2017 earthquake, many Mexicans are working together to stay positive amidst the chaos and disaster. I hope that this spirit of companionship and mutual support is sustained - and I think it will if we can keep the volunteer flame alive and learn from this experience.

In terms of where we go from here, based on my research and experience, organized volunteering will be key for the future of the country. The spontaneous participation seen throughout the recent earthquake should be channelled effectively to allow people to make valuable contributions through volunteerism. Civil society organizations around the country must be prepared to receive an influx of energy and solidarity after a natural disaster. Volunteers need to be part of legal frameworks that enhance participation and reinforce voluntary action. Mexican citizens have demonstrated to the world that they are caring and capable, and the consolidation of this volunteer spirit is vitally important as we go forward together as a nation.

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