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## Prosocial Governance for Peacebuilding and Community Resilience:

Experiences from Mexico

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To address an unprecedented and inherited violence epidemic, the Mexican government is promoting a new security paradigm based on local policies to prevent violence, provide transitional justice, build a culture of peace and catalyse well-being. Hence, the National Strategy for Peace and Security 2018-2024<sup>2</sup> represents a turning point from past punitive practices, shifting its focus to address the root causes of violence. Challenges are paramount, but preliminary analyses foresee encouraging signs, demonstrating that policies can be formulated in new ways. Experiences from Mexico show how solidarity, altruism and mutual aid are major assets to organizing prosocial governance and building resilience to crisis.

Two years after the perfect storm derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, two cardinal questions will mark the UN's global Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals: How can countries recover from the current socio-economic crisis? And how do they prepare for future global crises? Eventually, proposals to answer these will define the post-2030 sustainable development agenda. The challenge is to revamp our institutions based on renegotiating the social contract that binds citizens with their governments.

In a generalized context of constraints (i.e., budget, natural resources and mobility), government aspirations for infinite economic abundance have been replaced by the need to do more with less. On the one hand, the cornerstone of the liberal

state's ability to act—the endless search for sustained economic prosperity—is being tested by the limits to growth,<sup>3</sup> appearing to be a futile delusion for dealing with the current situation.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, governments and citizens are now forced to maneuver with scarcity (which is pronounced in developing countries), a new normal that policy makers cannot ignore.

This paper aims to shed light on alternative pathways to address the role of the State. Research indicates that in a context defined by scarcity, mutual aid—cooperation—is more efficient than competitiveness.<sup>5</sup> Mutual aid is understood here as a radical interdependence among stakeholders. Thus, complex interweaving of beneficial associations (cooperation rationale) is more useful

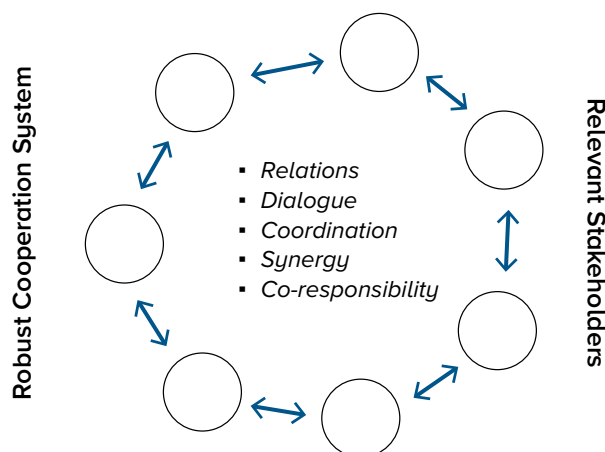
for pursuing society's sustainable development goals than the war of all against all (competition rationale). This paper will focus on mutual aid and how it paves the way for the emergence of a new understanding of governance: prosocial governance.

In contrast to the long-lasting efforts to foster an enabling environment for business,<sup>6</sup> a prosocial government opposes the necessity to organize society as a robust cooperation system bolstered by prosocial behaviors.<sup>7</sup> Aiming to move past traditional models that encourage unlimited economic growth, prosocial governance configures itself as relational governance, structured around dialogue, coordination, synergy and co-responsibility among relevant stakeholders. Unlike the welfare state, which focuses on well-being, the prosocial state sets resilience as its ultimate goal. In other words, it assumes that the state has the primary responsibility for building an environment that enables cooperation, acting as an instrument to unleash the potential of radical interdependence and forge resilience to face future crises. The notion of prosocial governance offers an original framework to achieve sustainable and resilient recovery from the political crisis derived from the pandemic (even if no one really knows what a sustainably developed society looks like).

This policy brief analyses two projects implemented by the current Mexican government: the Peace Fairs and Voluntary Disarmament initiative; and the Model for Community Resilience to rebuild the Social Fabric (MOREC is its acronym in Spanish).<sup>8</sup> Both are considered here as embryonic examples of prosocial governance as they rely upon a complex network of interactions among diverse local stakeholders and the government (far from the traditional top-down public policy cycle). Moreover, they materialize a different method of designing policies, one that is not oriented by results-based management. In contrast, these policies vindicate the capacities of institutions and the effectiveness of social norms in reinforcing and maintaining social cohesion.

**Figure 1: Prosocial Governance**

**A Complex Interweaving of Beneficial Associations**



Source: Own elaboration.

At a time when technical economic recession and sustained domestic austerity policies are manifest, the field is open to experimenting with initiatives that do not need significant disbursements. On the contrary, policy makers could take advantage of the prosocial behaviors at hand—solidarity, altruism and mutual aid—to catalyse virtuous spirals of reciprocity.

As background on the Mexican context, it is interesting to revise the evolution of some indicators before and after the current administration took office. While in 2018, 84% of the population considered themselves unsatisfied with the way democracy functioned and 88% believed that a few powerful groups governed the country for their own benefit, in 2020, these numbers dropped to 67% and 71%, respectively.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, it is important to recall that Mexico has faced a widespread crisis of violence since the *War on Drugs* was declared in 2007. This has had devastating effects on social cohesion, causing a systematic violation of human rights and unprecedented levels of violence.<sup>10</sup>

However, this trend has stagnated and might be starting to reverse slightly. In 2019 and 2020, the first two years of the new National Strategy for Peace and Security, annual homicides per year rose to around 37,000. In 2021, preliminary data shows that the figure decreased to 33,000 (-3.6%).<sup>11</sup> While further studies are needed to establish a correlation between the implementation of the new National Strategy and the decreasing annual homicides per year, the numbers are encouraging.

## Peace Fairs and Voluntary Disarmament

Formulated and implemented by the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, the Peace Fairs and Voluntary Disarmament initiatives are being carried out in the 50 municipalities that show the highest rate of violence in the country.<sup>12</sup> Besides offering in-kind money in exchange of weapons, the fairs are organized around various services: medical and psychological care, legal and social workers' advice, and recreational activities. In 2021, 2,500 people benefitted from the first Peace Fair, held in Oaxaca. According to the information shared by the Ministry, these included 400 children, 1,300 women and 800 men. It is significant that the space dedicated to exchanging war-themed toys for educational toys was the most visited of all, and that more women than men have attended the fairs. The Peace Fairs seem to attain a mostly female, youth, and child audience. The fairs' objective is to promote values, attitudes and behaviors that reject violence and prevent conflicts, as well as negotiation and dialogue techniques for solving conflicts when possible. They intend to raise public awareness on social risk factors and their possible consequences at a community and individual level, fostering a culture of peace within families to reduce violent environments and criminal behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

Current figures estimate that around 15 million weapons are circulating in the country and are responsible for 67% of the total intentional homicides.<sup>14</sup> Alongside traditional public security policies, prevention-centred programmes to expose the danger of civil possession of firearms, ammunition or explosives become even more relevant.

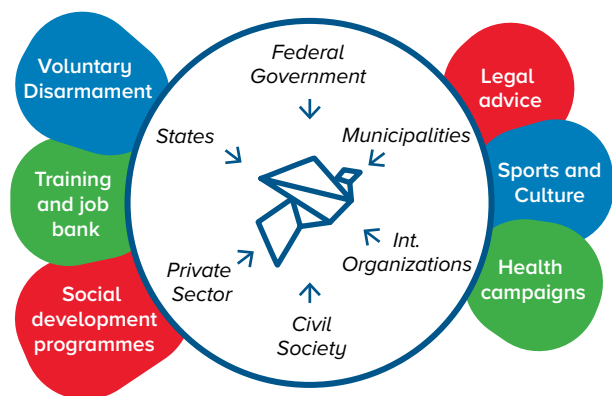
However, several characteristics of the Peace Fairs' initiative stand out as different when compared to traditional policymaking. First, the fairs were originally organized at the local level. Before being scaled up at national level, the Peace Fairs were implemented as a programme in Mexico City from 2012 to 2018. It is worth noting that similar federal policies are generally formulated from a top-down approach. Other than the policy transfer case study,<sup>15</sup> we are interested in the social network created to sustain the Peace Fairs. Official sources report that the programme mobilized 24,000 social workers, who visited 500,000 homes in marginalized neighborhoods of Mexico City to promote the initiative (collecting 4,282 firearms during its first year).<sup>16</sup> The network served as a vehicle to build a new public security model based

on proximity and trust between the government and its citizens.

Second, the Peace Fairs' viability depends on intergovernmental coordination and social engagement. As Figure 2 shows, the organization of the Peace Fairs was conceived as a unique space where the government (federal, state and local) meets with civil society and private sector stakeholders—along with international organizations—to discuss security issues and, more specifically, to cooperate around peacebuilding strategies.

**Figure 2: Organizing Committee of Peace Fairs**

**Intergovernmental coordination and social engagement  
Government-Society meeting point**



Source: Own elaboration.

After several months of preparations and planning,<sup>17</sup> the first Peace Fair and Voluntary Disarmament took place in the city of Oaxaca on 4 and 5 December, 2021.<sup>18</sup> Implementing the fair helped to launch the National Strategy for Peace and Security, shifting the focus from punitive to preventive security policies and gathering local organizations that work to counteract the effects of violence in the community. Firearms were exchanged and destroyed before the delighted eyes of the public, and participants had free access to a wide array of campaigns, exhibitions, cultural events and, ultimately, prosocial activities.

In the same spirit as its local predecessor, the Mexican government aims to sustain the social network that emerged through the Peace Fair in Oaxaca over time, harnessing its potential to disseminate a culture of peace within communities and replicate it throughout the other

50 municipalities where the programme will be implemented in the next three years. While the government reported that 2021 closed with a 3.6% drop in intentional homicides (a major indicator of

the status of violence in the country),<sup>19</sup> there is still limited evidence to prove its correlation with the current National Strategy for Peace and Security.

## Model for Community Resilience to Rebuild the Social Fabric

Designed and executed by the Ministry of Interior, MOREC is a comprehensive policy that seeks to protect human rights, strengthen community resilience and rebuild the social fabric in selected municipalities. It consists of three work stages (see Figure 3): (1) a training and knowledge sharing programme; (2) strategic liaisons; and (3) recovery of public spaces by the community. The training programme includes seven hybrid workshops that address life skills, parenting skills, appropriation of public spaces, art, socio-productive entrepreneurship and consensus-building. The strategic liaison stage offers a wide array of social development projects and activities for potential beneficiaries. Finally, to recover public spaces, the government supports community organizations, such as neighborhood solidarity support networks,<sup>20</sup> in taking back control of the current—and often abandoned—community development centres scattered throughout the country.

The general objective is to prepare the first generation of trainers, who will then reproduce the model in neighborhoods suffering from high crime rates. Implementation locations will depend on a community intervention plan elaborated by local stakeholders that will be part of the decision-making process to ensure ownership. Once approved, officials from the Ministry of Interior will negotiate the intervention plan with local authorities, reach out to diverse local stakeholders and arrange a mission to organize the community around MOREC's work stages.

MOREC aims to reinforce youth's skills to reduce risks and prevent vulnerabilities to crime and violence at an individual and collective level. It targets young people between 13 and 20 years of age to enable their active participation in public affairs and help them become agents of change for their communities. Based on the preferred well-known definition of community resilience, this is "the ability of communities (and their members) exposed to disasters, crises and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact of, cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and stresses without compromising their long-term prospects";<sup>21</sup> MOREC seeks to provide new social, cognitive and expressive skills; rescue

public spaces that facilitate the creation of citizen networks; improve community engagement; and increase feelings of security and well-being—put concisely, to rebuild the social fabric to achieve a resilient society.<sup>22</sup>

MOREC's approach strongly resembles the one promoted by UNDP, specifically, the efforts to integrate not only the objective elements of social cohesion (personal and family safety and security, responsive and inclusive governance institutions, rule of law and enabling civic space), but also elements considered subjective, such as perceived access to justice, voice and participation, and citizen acknowledgement of the legitimacy of existing formal and informal institutions.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 3: MOREC**

### Three work stages



Source: Own elaboration.

Initially deployed as a pilot initiative in the states of Baja California, Puebla, Chiapas, Morelos and San Luis Potosí, the programme was formally extended to the Hidalgo-Guanajuato strip, Aguililla, Michoacan and the Riviera Maya region in 2021. The first interventions are intended to address the critical rates of violence observed during the last years, while the last interventions are designed to ease and anticipate tensions within local communities that will experience the arrival of the Mayan Train in 2023.<sup>24</sup> According to government officials, some 500 young people have taken

part in the program. In addition, MOREC has implemented five training sessions (attended by more than 120 people from 22 states) and has facilitated the recovery of six public spaces: three in Salamanca, Guanajuato, one in San Luis Potosí, one in Puebla, and one in Tapachula, Chiapas.

The case of San Felipe in Baja California deserves special attention. Acting as a laboratory for federal social policies, MOREC aspires to support San

Felipe's aspirations to become Mexico's newest municipality, based on its contribution to its citizens' plans and needs to become an independent municipality. It is worth emphasizing that MOREC's efforts include a coordination mechanism of more than 20 government agencies and two international organizations that periodically meet to strategically focus their social programmes on the selected municipalities of intervention.

## Policy recommendations

- Acknowledge prosocial behaviors (i.e., solidarity, altruism, mutual aid, shared wellbeing, cooperation) as major assets of public policies and as building blocks of a different governance model.
- Recognize cooperation as a more efficient strategy than competitiveness to achieve sustainable development goals.
- Identify and support local initiatives that contribute to building an enabling environment for cooperation.
- Reflect on the implications of a prosocial state that sets resilience as its primary

responsibility and ultimate goal, as well as on its qualities to harness the potential of radical interdependence.

- Systematize, compare, monitor and evaluate similar experiences to learn lessons and knowledge sharing.
- Experiment with prosocial governance as a means to reconstruct trust and legitimacy in political, economic and social actors.
- Engage in a democratic conversation to rethink, discuss and redefine the social contract and the role of the state to recover from the pandemic and prepare for future global crises.

## Building an enabling environment for cooperation

The emergence of prosocial governance can help public stakeholders overcome the paradox in which political institutions have been entangled for too long—that is, the duty to build a society immersed in an environment determined by a competition rationale. There are no easy responses to the two initial questions of this policy paper; however, the experiences presented offer interesting clues: They reinforce a culture of peace and community resilience as a means to setting up an enabling environment for cooperation, relying on subjective and objective elements of social cohesion, acknowledging solidarity, altruism and mutual aid as major assets of public policies—mutually beneficial interactions. They challenge the technocratic mindset behind classic policymaking and embrace emerging alternatives from the Global South. They acknowledge that mutual aid is more efficient than competitiveness and that the state has the responsibility to institutionalize it. Despite the experimental character of the analysed

experiences, it can be deduced that their ultimate outcome is no longer efficiency but a shared social foundation of cooperation.

The cooperation rationale recognizes that radical interdependence among individuals builds resilience for facing crises.<sup>25</sup> Comprehending the implication and potential impact of a prosocial governance approach—as an instrument to reconstruct trust and legitimacy in political, economic and social actors<sup>26</sup>—could pave the way for alternative policy options and renewed coordination to recover from the pandemic and prepare for future global crises in times of uncertainty. Social contracts under pressure would benefit from a state willing to evolve in terms of its relationship with citizens and its role in the organization of society, overcoming the limitless growth paradigm and establishing a new prosocial horizon.



## Endnotes

- 1 Carlos Cortés Zea is the Effective Governance and Democracy National Officer at UNDP in Mexico; email: [carlos.cortes-zea@undp.org](mailto:carlos.cortes-zea@undp.org). **Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank Asa Walton, Policy Specialist Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, UNDP Crisis Bureau, and Jairo Acuña-Alfaro, Team Leader Governance, UNDP Regional Hub for Latin American and the Caribbean, for their review and helpful comments to this brief.
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