

Civil society organisations in Mexico are hanging in the balance following the government's decision to cancel funding

Saturday 14 September 2019, by [ARELLANO Irma Rosa Martínez](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2019).

Aurelia's husband used to beat her at night while her daughters were asleep. In the morning the girls would notice her bruises and ask if she'd fallen from the bed. She'd lie to them. He even beat her when she was pregnant. She was desperate for help but didn't know where to turn. He told her she could never get rid of him.

A friend finally told her about the *Red Nacional de Refugios* (National Network of Shelters) where she could find protection. "If it wasn't for the civil organisation that runs the shelter, I wouldn't be alive today," says Aurelia, hugging one of her daughters.

These shelters (41 in Mexico along with 39 external care centres) now find themselves under threat following the decision by Mexico's new president Andrés Manuel López Obrador to cut funding to civil society organisations (CSOs). He claims that such organisations have been intermediaries that advantage of resources which are meant to benefit the general population.

When this decision provoked national outrage and the *Red Nacional de Refugios* organised in protest, López Obrador agreed to issue an open call for a limited number of organisations working on the issue of gender equity to tender for funding this year. It is not clear what will happen beyond 2019.

"We are in a state of emergency. Between nine to ten femicides occur every day, meaning that in Mexico a women is killed every three hours. The life and safety of women who have been abused should not be subject to competition. We cannot continue in this state of uncertainty about the fate of these shelters," says Wendy Figueroa, director of the *Red Nacional de Refugios*, in an interview with Equal Times.

"Our work is saving lives and the future of the shelters is uncertain. They have not been protected. There is no clear, bold and effective public policy for guaranteeing that women are protected from violence. The government's so-called plan is nothing more than a short list of proposals that demonstrate just how unfamiliar they are with the phenomenon of violence. They think they can solve the problem by simply giving money directly to victims. They don't even use the term 'shelter,' instead they talk about 'lodging'," says Figueroa.

As she explains, the organisation received €13.3 million (approximately US\$14.96 million) last year to operate its centre thanks to agreements that establish strict rules of operation under which the centres are systematically supervised and audited.

President López Obrador has reiterated his decision to cancel funding for all other civil society organisations. He argues that previous governments granted them the equivalent of €1.38 billion (about US\$ 1.54 billion), though he does not specify over what period of time, and that this money

did not reach the segments of the population most in need.

The case of the *Red Nacional de Refugios* is an example of how populations who have benefited from the work of citizen organisations may be impacted.

The risks of weakening organised civil society

In addition to state funding, civil society organisations rely on donations from private entities as well as funds generated by their own activities. But López-Obrador has simultaneously decided to eliminate incentives (tax deductibility) for private companies to make donations, meaning that civil society organisations now risk being cut off from both of their sources of outside funding.

According to Clara Jusidman, a tireless activist in the fight against poverty and the defence of human, electoral and social rights, although many who work for civil society organisations don't want to oppose the new president, elected in 2018 with an overwhelming majority, they are "against the illegal actions he is carrying out, such as blocking funds already allocated by the congress as part of the 2019 budget."

Jusidman warns that López Obrador's denigration of civil society organisations, which he has called "useless" and "corrupt", puts human rights defenders at risk. She fears for the survival of many small organisations all over the country doing important work for different sections of the population.

This includes people working in very difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions for low wages or as volunteers for organisations working to address homelessness, reintegrate former prisoners into society and provide help to people with disabilities, victims of trafficking and people suffering from mental illness. "And the government does not have the capacity to serve them, it's weighed down by bureaucracy and moves very slowly. It's the organisations that get things done," she says.

The government is also, she argues, violating the right of citizens to organise, participate in society and defend themselves from dictatorial, corrupt and inefficient authorities. "This impacts the human rights that are central to democracy," she says.

The president's problem with CSOs

"Two days ago I issued a memorandum stating that funds will no longer be transferred from the budget to social organisations, unions, so-called civil society organisations, NGOs or philanthropic organisations. The government's support will be given directly to the beneficiaries," the president announced on 18 February.

"Civil society is a pretext for conservatism. Even large consortiums promote civil society," he added the following day, explaining the reason for his decision.

Previous governments (of other political parties) occasionally made discretionary use of resources earmarked for civil society organisations. One example of such bad practices is [the famous case](#) of contributions equalling roughly €78 million (US\$ 87 million) to two organisations associated with one of Mexico's leading television stations, *TV Azteca*, a private company. These contributions were made for over a decade, with funding for culture being drastically reduced over the same period. It so happens that the head of one of the organisations that benefitted is now the Secretary of Education in the president's cabinet.

But this is not true of the vast majority of the close to 40,000 organisations registered in Mexico. In [a letter addressed to López Obrador](#), 92 of the country's leading civil organisations have asked the

president to reconsider his decision. They argue that while not every citizen, organised or otherwise, acts in an honest and transparent manner, and that some exploit the needs and pain of others for their own profit, many CSOs have “fought for the common good, defended human rights and advocated for governments that serve the people.”

Rogelio Gómez Hermosillo, an international consultant in the fight against poverty with a long history of defending rights, argues that the president is fighting a political battle with those he considers to be his conservative opponents for their criticism of some of his decisions.

These include suspending construction of an airport that was more than 30 per cent complete, basing important decisions on questionable information selected without formality or professional rigor and legalising the military’s participation in public security, among others.

“[With his decision to eliminate support for CSOs and NGOs, the president] is ending all collaboration with civil society. Public-private partnerships for social projects is a well-known model throughout the world that proposes taking advantage of the expertise, skill, spirit and generosity of these organisations,” says Gómez Hermosillo.

“Decisions are being made very rigidly and without nuance,” and this entire model of collaboration is “getting a bad rap” despite the existence of a law that promotes such organisations. “Organisations tender for funds in open calls with clear rules. This is of great value to a democratic state because it produces good results,” he adds.

Marian Olvera, director of *Alternativas y Capacidades*, an organisation that helps civil society organisations advocate for themselves, says that the president has cut off funding that has already been allocated. The rules governing the programme of public-private partnerships (under which the organisations contribute a percentage of the cost of a specific project) had already been established, but when the president issued his now famous [Circular 01](#), they were cancelled.

The equivalent of €6.2 million (US\$ 7 million), roughly 37 per cent less than in 2018, have been approved for this programme.

Civil society organisations provide a counterweight to government

CSOs also serve to promote autonomous institutions such as the independent non-governmental authority that organises elections, which for many years has served as a model for countries all around the world - and which oversaw the election of the current president. Civil society is also responsible for creating an autonomous institution that guarantees access to public information and has advocated for legislation for the defence of human rights. These are only a few examples of the relevance of CSOs for the country’s democratic life.

Civil society also serves as a counterweight to the government. At the end of February, the congress approved a constitutional reform sought by the president that legalises the participation of the armed forces in public security, which was previously prohibited. Thanks to pressure from an important group of civil society organisations promoting the campaign #seguridadesinguerre (security without war), time limits were set for military presence in public security work and the need to strengthen civilian police was emphasised. Although civilian command of the national guard was also mandated, the president appointed as its head an active military officer in the process of retirement.

During his presidential campaign, López Obrador promised that the military would no longer participate in public security, a function reserved for civilians ; as president, he

has already moved to institutionalise their participation, including by modifying the constitution.

Before these changes were approved by the congress, López Obrador took aim at those who criticised him for advocating for the national guard : “The experts and civil society organisations, I don’t know what they’re thinking, but enough is enough. It’s all an act. All these experts do is analyse society without actually transforming it. It’s all expertise, diagnostics, studies, hiring consultants, but nothing is being done to change things. We urgently need a national guard, it’s of vital importance.”

A war of numbers

It is unclear what the president was referring to when he spoke of €1.38 billion granted to CSOs. According to available official information, civil society organisations were awarded approximately €324 million (US\$ 361 million) in 2016.

An analysis by the research institute of the Mexican Senate indicates an alarming trend in the public financing of CSOs : funding granted in 2014, 2015 and 2016, when adjusted for inflation, was practically the same as that which was granted in 2012. “Viewed in this light, funding has not only not increased, but decreased in 2013 by 17 per cent and in 2016 by 7 per cent compared to the previous years.”

What’s most alarming is that, in their statistics on funding for civil society organisations, the Mexican authorities include associations that are in fact decentralised government entities that perform state functions such as adult education, sports activities and business incubators. These entities are referred to as government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs).

According to [a study](#) by the organisation Alternativas y Capacidades on federal funding for civil society organisations, about 40 per cent of all reported funds were actually transferred from government agencies to government institutions set up as civil associations.

As the study concludes : “These are resources that some agencies allocate to entities set up as civil associations but which in fact are not independent of the public administration. Their governing bodies are composed exclusively or primarily of people appointed by the heads of agencies and essentially operate with public funding and were created with the mission of carrying out government programmes.”

As *Alternativas y Capacidades* argues, according to this breakdown, the amount received by independent civil society organisations, which do not act for their own benefit, is much lower than official reports indicate.

Translated from Spanish.

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