

# Pro bono in the face of natural disasters – the Mexican experience after the 2017 earthquakes

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The inhabitants of Mexico City will find it difficult to forget 19 September 2017. Just a few weeks after an 8.2 magnitude earthquake hit the southern coast of the Mexico in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, affecting almost 2.5 million Mexicans, at 1314 hours on the 19 September, a second earthquake with a magnitude of 7.2 and a duration of almost three minutes shook Izucar de Matamoros, Puebla, approximately 120 km from Mexico City.

Given the original conditions on which Mexico City was founded – on top of a lake by early Aztecs – as well as the proximity to the epicentre, the shockwave was amplified and more than 40 buildings collapsed in Mexico City.

Before governmental authorities were ready to set up a response plan, hundreds of volunteers, which later became thousands, took to the streets and started moving collapsed buildings, rock by rock, with the hopes of rescuing those trapped in the rubble. In just a few hours teams had been created, ranks had been established and the rescue efforts were well on their way, to be strengthened later by the navy, army and foreign specialists who flew all the way from Canada, Israel, Japan and other supporting countries.

But what about lawyers? Where were they and what were they doing? One of the most successful initiatives surged out of a WhatsApp group where the directors of the three main clearing houses in Mexico – Fundación Appleseed, Centro Pro Bono México and Fundación Barra Mexicana – interacted with a core group of pro bono coordinators from some of Mexico's most reputable firms – Basham, Greenberg Traurig, Hogan Lovells and Ringe y Correa.

After confirming everyone was safe, a separate chat was created exclusively focused on articulating a coordinated response from the legal community. Possible ideas started pouring in from all members: hands-on immediate non-legal assistance to join the rescue efforts; boots on the ground with groups of lawyers to provide legal assistance; and setting-up a hotline for victims. That's all it took to get things moving.

A daily debrief call was established and the members of the group checked-in to report advances, efforts and ideas. Appleseed set up an electronic database where victims could provide basic contact information and a brief description of their legal needs, which were later distributed to a group of law firms who committed their lawyers to contacting the victims and providing the assistance required. As follow-up, these firms reported the results of these conversations to the clearing houses, to guarantee the attention of all registered victims.

After only a couple of days, based on the experience from the hotline and on the input received from attorneys assisting in the field, another initiative was put forward: creating a manual with the most common legal questions received over the past few days, so that it could be distributed electronically and work as a basic guide for attorneys providing assistance. With only an idea in mind, the clearing houses coordinated the distribution of the questions among allied firms, who in turn provided answers

as soon as possible to put together a first working draft. Every three or four days, the guide was amended and perfected.

In an unprecedented effort, the first version of the guide was published in less than a week. It not only provided answers to the most common legal questions of victims but it also created a snowball effect, in which more and more lawyers were empowered to raise their hands and join the effort to help the victims, doing what they do best: providing legal assistance.

What started out as a small group of lawyers wondering how they could be of service soon became a regional effort involving individuals, law firms, academia, bar associations and even media outlets who wanted to this effort to reach as many victims as possible.

Days turned into weeks: the guide was continuously updated, the database and hotline continued rendering services and groups of coordinated lawyers set up on-site pro bono shops to go directly to the victims with legal assistance.

As with everything else in life, the hyperactivity of the days following the event gradually subsided back to 'normality', at least for those not directly affected by the earthquake. Even though some collapsed buildings remain as a constant reminder of a disaster of now six months ago, Mexico City appears up and running; however, this first impression should not be taken at face value.

As of today, several law firms and lawyers have picked up numerous representative cases mostly involving collapsed buildings, which may have been irregularly authorised or supervised because of apparent acts of corruption or irregular governmental activities in issuing construction permits. These firms and lawyers are providing continuous pro bono support to the victims and have set diverse judicial means in motion, to make sure that, even if it means taking the long road, responsible parties are accountable. Something like this should never happen again.

And it all started with just a WhatsApp group and the conviction of a few lawyers who believed in using what they learned in school for a higher cause.