

Chapter 6

Findings, Challenges, and Implications

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This volume contains information of interest about volunteer actions and acts of solidarity in Mexico, and represents one of the first investigations of its kind in the country. Due to its methodology and scope, it is a pioneering work offering information at a national level. The intention is to validate these activities, quantify the number of volunteers and people expressing solidarity, as well as the hours worked, and, particularly, to understand, as far as possible, not only the nature of volunteer work, but also its geographical distribution in the country, its characteristics and principal motivations, the insertion and participation of volunteers in social organizations, and to provide a closer approximation of the role played in these organizations by those we have identified as volunteers, and people expressing solidarity in three ways: intense, typical, and sporadic volunteers, in accordance with our own classification.

This chapter brings together what we think are the main contributions of the study presented in *Mexican Solidarity* and also brings together the two main complementary components of this study, i.e., the results of the ENSAV¹ and the findings of the 15 completed case studies. It also poses some suggestions and indicates certain implications for engaging in these activities in the Mexican context. We considered that all solidarity and volunteer activities and actions by the Mexican people were valid and pertinent for inclusion in this investigation, and the study and methodology were designed based on this reasoning, which was considered to be appropriate for the work presented.

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¹*Encuesta Nacional de Solidaridad y Acción Voluntaria* (National Survey on Solidarity and Volunteer Action),

Main Findings and Contributions

Survey

As previously mentioned in this book, it is common to hear the opinion that those who contribute the most volunteer work are people from middle and high income brackets since they may perhaps be able to dedicate more time to these kinds of activities due to their relatively secure situation. Our study shows that this not the case. *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 is one of the most important general findings of our work. In regard to this kind of behavior, like others, expressions of solidarity in Mexican society take place with a similar intensity across all social strata.

However, *preferences for the trio of acts of solidarity in favor of church, school, and neighbors in that order, reveal and reflect the importance that Mexican society as a whole accords these two institutions (church and school), as well as to other actors, one's neighbors, who are part of daily life due to their proximity.* We should not forget that most Mexicans declare themselves to be Catholic, and that the undiluted Catholic tradition that has been inculcated in the country's inhabitants throughout its history, through acts of piety and worship, as well as through commemorations of patron saints, most often plays a central role in both urban neighborhoods and rural communities. Alternatively, school has come to represent a symbol of social mobility, which, together with the objective processes of learning, has given it great prestige. This is why Mexicans perform an important part of their solidarity activities in favor of schools that are educating or have educated their children. Also, *the degree of dedication to solidarity in these three categories is basically similar in all regions of the country, with only a few minor differences.* This kind of orientation on the part of the majority seems to be a clear characteristic that is expressed among Mexicans in all parts of the country.

In terms of the *different kinds of acts of solidarity performed by Mexicans, we find that those who carry them out, whether it is through the church or school, provide physical labor above all, followed at a distance by teaching and then fundraising activities.* These are three very necessary kinds of activity, especially in the conditions of a country like Mexico, where even minimal resources are often scarce. This is why help is frequently requested for cleaning in churches and schools, as well as for certain basic maintenance work for classrooms and offices. Fundraising is another important activity, perhaps more used in churches than in schools, but even in schools this is done to supplement academic materials in poorer schools of the country, and many of which are public schools.

For their part, *those who support neighbors or their community also do so, first, by engaging in physical labor, and what follows in second and third place are direct personal care or attention, and then fundraising, which is different from the*

previous cases. It should be recalled that, different types of work are performed in many small towns and neighborhoods to improve them, like introducing potable water, improving streets and roads, or repairing public works.

In the aspect of religious beliefs, we have also found that 68% of those who said they were religious have carried out some act of solidarity with others (34% at least one action and 34% two or more), while among those who reported not having a religion, only 51% said they had participated in these kinds of actions (26% at least one action and 26% carried out two or more). This difference, although it is not great, is sufficiently notable to lead us to believe that *belonging to a religion leads to a slightly greater inclination toward undertaking acts of solidarity in favor of others.* Likewise, we can also say that religious affiliation not only leads to a greater inclination toward acts of solidarity, but also facilitates a relatively greater intensity in performing these kinds of actions. However, we should take into account that we are talking about a population in which almost everyone (94%) says they believe in some religion, at the same time, as has already been mentioned, one of the main contexts through which acts of solidarity occur is through the church.

In this same context, it is appropriate to recall that *among the group of those who answered our survey saying they have no religion but do engage in acts of solidarity, the types of activities they engage in the most have to do first, with their neighbors and community, and secondly with school.*

In answer to the question of whether acts of solidarity take place through organized groups or not, *it is clear that in Mexico these kinds of actions mostly occur outside of institutions and organized groups.* This is another finding of our investigation, and as mentioned in the corresponding chapter, has now been supported by data indicating that engaging in acts of solidarity and belonging to organized groups are not necessarily the same for Mexicans. On the contrary, most of these kinds of activities are carried out individually or through informal groups with a structure that is probably quite weak.

However, we also found that *belonging to a group tends to imply a greater disposition toward engaging in some kind of action to benefit others.* This is a characteristic that is related in some way to group membership, so, although group membership is low, it seems that when present this has a certain impact, encouraging these people to perform their actions through an institution or group.

A more careful analysis of the information led us to identify *three profiles of solidarity actors:*

First, there is the small group of what we call “*intense volunteers*”: the 8% of solidarity actors who said they work every day in these kinds of activities, although with differences in the number of hours each one dedicates to this. They provide an average equivalent to 186 eight-hour working days a year. *This group is made up of almost two-thirds women, in contrast with the sample as a whole in which the proportion between the genders is very similar (46% men and 53% women).* We think that this is probably due to the intense nature of these kinds of activities, insofar as women being more dedicated to household duties may have some affect on this kind of behavior, in part, perhaps, because of having a little more free time. However, this would be a subject to explore more thoroughly in the future.

On the other hand, in the northern and central regions of the country, there are a few more of these kinds of actors (30% and 29%, respectively), while in the southern region they only represent 18%. This is a notable difference, especially because there are more deficiencies in the southern states. However, this is another point it would be good to explore further in the future: What other factors in the Mexican sociocultural and economic situation impact solidarity action behavior? We shall leave this question open for the moment, since the data gathered here does not allow us to pose any solid, plausible hypothesis at this time.

We have called the second profile that was identified the “*typical volunteers*”. They have a constant dedication to solidarity activities that ranges from 2 to 3 times a week to once every 2 weeks. They represent 32% of volunteer actors and dedicate an average of 34 eight-hour days a year to this activity. *There are a few slightly more women (59%) than men in this group. However, in contrast with the two other profiles, they are the ones who work the most in the church. They are also the ones who engage in most activities through organized groups (49%). Similarly, they are the ones who are most likely to belong to an organized group.*

Finally, the third profile of solidarity actors corresponds to those whom we call “*infrequent volunteers*”. Their dedication to these labors ranges from once a month to several times a year. They dedicate an average of 1.7 working days a year.

In summary, the average number of days per solidarity actor was 27 per year, which is equivalent to 2.2 days a month, and if we extend that amount to the 40% of the Mexican population over 18, we would have about 23 million people, each providing an average of 2.2 days of work per month or 27 days per year.

All together, these working days would amount to 2.6 million jobs, *equivalent to 11.3% of the employed population outside the agricultural sector* for the Mexican population over 18 years old during a year. Calculating this based on the minimum wage, we are talking about between 20.33 billion and 88.082 billion pesos.² This figure would represent 1.14% of the GNP in 2004. If we compare this figure to the total GNP for community, social, and personal services, it would come to 4.7%. That figure would represent, in monetary terms, the contribution of free labor that the Mexican population provides the country in expressions of solidarity.

Case Studies

As a complement to the 2005 ENSAV survey, the case studies have provided an indispensable qualitative dimension for understanding volunteer action and acts of solidarity. It was decided to do these studies in the structured environment represented by nonprofit organizations, where it was easier to contact and interview volunteers. Similarly, it was thought that a possibility would open up within these organizational

²Depending on whether 1 working day of free labor is assigned a value of one or three daily minimum wages.

structures to observe and delve more deeply into different activities and actions carried out by volunteers, based on their own reflections and comments.

Three of the chapters in this volume deal with analyzing and discussing the material gathered based on structuring 15 case studies with a total of 66 in-depth interviews with volunteers, including people designated as such by the organizations, staff personnel or coordinators, the director or informal leader, and the founder in each case, when possible.

The general characteristics of the organizations were analyzed, as well as the family and personal background of the subjects and the reasons and motivations expressed by them for engaging in volunteer and solidarity-type work. Finally, the discussion went more deeply into “giving” as the main motivation of the people interviewed.

In terms of the most relevant findings concerning the themes dealt with, and the way in which nonprofit organizations are developing in Mexico, this analysis revealed that *personal initiative or initiative by a group of people is a fundamental element in the creation and structure of both formal and informal organizations*. Specifically, in order for a concern to have meaning and become an institutional project with the possibility of becoming consolidated, and reproducing itself over the long run, common people with certain particular characteristics and have an interest in doing something for others are required.

In addition, *it was found that the possibilities for the success of a project depend on several different factors and that there is a definite risk that it may not become consolidated*. But there is less risk of this to the degree that the project’s promoters take the necessary time to structure a good proposal, as well as to develop a support network making it possible to continue functioning during the first years, which seem to be the most uncertain ones. This implies that the founder plays a key role in the process, as does all economic and social support that may be attained.

In the cases analyzed, some of the founders were professionals with the tools and experience necessary to undertake the task of attracting other interested parties, as well as developing a series of support links. They understood that both economic resources and a framework of social networks were required to support and maintain a structured project. *That is to say, in order to achieve a more solid organization, the professionalization of the founder and the initial participants in the project is essential, since certain abilities are required in order to gain access to indispensable resources from international organizations and foundations, as well as from the few domestic sources of support available*.

Although the good will to want to do something for others is important, it is also essential to have the necessary background to be able to fulfill multiple requirements, in order to be able to formulate a project focused on volunteer action or acts of solidarity, especially, if it is planned to be a long-term project.

In terms of the *characteristics of the volunteers*, we found that the individual life experiences of the subjects, as well as their reasons for actively participating in these kinds of actions, *make it possible for us to locate at least three different types of volunteers*.

1. *Those who come from families where this kind of learning is an everyday way of expressing commitment to others*. In this case, it may be the mother, father, or

both, or perhaps grandparents or an aunt or uncle who is engaged in these activities on an everyday basis and so it is seen as something natural, when one is socialized in this context, to continue this family tradition into adult life.

2. *Those who combine a complex mix of religious values, education, and some event in their life that is the stimulating factor leading them to enter into the path of volunteer actions.* Here a certain vocation or “calling” appears to transform their personal or family problem into something including others in similar situations.
3. *Those whose social concerns are assumed as a personal responsibility to contribute to transforming situations of profound social inequality.* These are people whose ideas were formed in specific contexts or moments of our history and, as a result, they have a different perspective on what they will do in life.

Although these are the types that emerge from the analysis, we consider that *the most important finding is the one concerning the role that the family of origin plays as a transmitter of a series of values and principles that will be put into practice throughout the subject's life.*

In this regard, the mother's role stands out in terms of teachings a mix of religious and ethical values that are taken up by their daughters and translated into a commitment, motivation, or form of personal redemption when favoring the growth of others.

For men, at least in the set of cases analyzed, this does not happen, since they perceive the volunteer actions they perform as having a social character related to the community. We think it would be necessary to delve more deeply into these kinds of findings in order to gain deeper understanding of these processes, since women were the majority of those interviewed, outnumbering men three to one.

We also found that *the majority of people involved in volunteer actions or acts of solidarity, independent of their position within the organizational structure, were in the productive stage of their lives and also were engaged in some economic activity to make a living, although there is also a section of retired women or housewives who dedicate part of their time to activities for third parties.* This demystifies the idea that volunteer actions are mainly performed by women from more comfortable middle or upper sectors or people with idle time that is filled in this way.

Another interesting point is the finding regarding the *mobility of those who participate in the organizations.* According to the information gathered, the participants in the organizations usually stay in the same organization for long periods of time, i.e., *mobility is almost zero.* Moreover, it was observed that a multiplier effect exists, that is to say, that several of them participated in two organizations.

Given the characteristics of the subjects and their individual histories, the time devoted to these kinds of long-term commitments is variable. The information indicates that there are at least *two different ways of devoting time and making one's knowledge available to others.*

- (a) Those who devote 7 to 10 h a day, i.e., almost a complete working day or a little more, to volunteer actions over some period of time that may last as long as

three years. These kinds of people have practically decided to dedicate their lives to guarantee the fulfillment of the organization's objectives, even at the cost of not being able to enter the labor market and having to depend on others (family members) in order to survive.

- (b) People who have devoted between an hour and a half and 10 h a week over periods of time of more than a decade of engaging in this activity. In this case, it is also a personal decision to devote specific times to these kinds of actions, where the aim is to fulfill the responsibilities acquired. This may be one or two times a week or on the weekends, depending on their available time. What is evident in the cases analyzed is that once the decision is made, the responsibility is fulfilled.

Regarding the type of activities the volunteers participate in, it was found that these are related to the kind of responsibility they have in the organizational structure. The founder undertakes activities to motivate the participants, consolidate the support networks, and raise funds for an activity in which the director participates at times. The directors, few of whom are volunteers, maintain the daily operations and do annual planning in collaboration with the trust or foundation, when one is involved. They also coordinate the actions of those below them. The coordinators, only a few of whom are volunteers, are the ones who execute the activities and at the same time pay attention to distributing tasks. The volunteers are the ones dealing directly with the organization's users. In this group, there are people with previously assigned responsibilities and also personnel who basically help with whatever is needed.

It should be pointed out that another finding is the difference between organizations made up only of volunteers and those that include both paid and volunteer personnel.

1. *In the case of organizations made up only of volunteers, where decisions are usually made by consensus, the members of the organization interchange responsibilities, since the aim is for everyone to get experience and get to know about the organization. In these cases, the motivation to continue, although personal, found a path to follow thanks to the interaction with a group in similar conditions. In general, everyone involved is considered to be equal in terms of abilities.*
2. *In the organizations that began due to promotion by a group or person and then became an entity with important participation on the part of paid personnel, the volunteers were usually located at the bottom of the organizational structure or outside of it. That is to say, the structure consists of paid personnel. In these cases it was observed that the volunteers are employed for diverse tasks and offer their help due to personal interest. This implies that the volunteers are not recognized as subjects with possibilities of carrying out concrete responsibilities over long periods of time.*

Here it is important to point out that several of the organizations do not consider the volunteers to be trained personnel. Moreover, it is not thought that their

professionalization is required in order for them to make contributions and take advantage of these available human resources. In regard to this, it might be pointed out that it is still necessary for the organizations themselves, and especially their administrative and coordinating cadre, to have a clear idea of what it means for a person to devote their time to helping others without pay. In the few cases in which the volunteers were incorporated into the structure, it seemed that there was a special motivation to be responsible for undertaking specific matters. This is something to be learnt from volunteer organizations.

Another finding worth mentioning is the attitude the interviewees had toward the volunteer work they perform. These are people who can be included among “typical and intense volunteers” with a certain degree of clarity about what they contribute to the organization, which is a result of their own decision and of a commitment they have assumed. *For most of the people included in this group, these activities give them pleasure, satisfaction, a raison d’être, and they say that their main motivation for acting is giving themselves to help and support others.* Others consider that they know what needs to be done for society and what should be done to improve the social environment surrounding them.

To summarize, it might be mentioned that volunteer actions are defined by the subjects as the act of giving, helping, or assisting others, believing in what one is doing and, especially, thinking about what needs to be done. In this regard, saying that this is done “to help others” is in fact a deeply-rooted conviction among participants in volunteer actions and acts of solidarity that has to do with the entire context they have experienced. In regard to “what needs to be done”, there is a clear perspective that is expressed by an important number of those interviewed. To the degree they participate in these actions, they realize that their commitment and activities alone are not enough in a country with such urgent social needs to be solved. It may be said that volunteer solidarity actions are a scarce commodity. What is available is not enough, it is necessary to increase the amount. It is, without a doubt, necessary to deepen this analysis. There are still large gaps in our knowledge in this area in the case of Mexico. For the moment, we think that, although many questions have been answered, a broad range of new questions have been generated that open new paths for investigation.

Challenges and Recommendations for Promoting Volunteer Activity and Participation in Acts of Solidarity

Challenges

Individual Volunteer/Solidarity Actions in Mexico

The analysis of the phenomenon of volunteer actions and acts of solidarity requires greater exploration and in-depth investigation to clarify the reasons why many of these activities are carried out in an isolated way. The fact that 21% of the total

universe of 66% of citizens acting in solidarity, i.e., *about one fourth of the current solidarity and volunteer activities in Mexico, are carried out in an isolated way* obliges us to look for reasons and new hypotheses that provide us with new scenarios to explain these numbers.

The first hypothesis – corroborated by other Mexican studies already mentioned – is that Mexicans do not usually work in groups or associations. This may be due to the lack of confidence in others in order to work in groups or to not being accustomed to doing so. The second hypothesis would have to do with the fiscal and legal difficulties in forming formal groups or associations. This is reflected in the results of the study themselves. They show that most of those who act as volunteers or express solidarity do so informally. The third hypothesis would have to do with Mexican religious customs, predominantly reflecting the Catholic tradition, in which acts of solidarity or assistance to others are not considered to be public, but rather private actions.³ At this time, these hypotheses remain as possible explanations of the data uncovered by our investigation and require greater reflection and study to be confirmed. The challenge in this first point is to find the primary causes of this reality so that society as a whole may take the corresponding measures.

Perception and Awareness of Volunteer Actions and Acts of Solidarity

Several myths about volunteer activity in Mexico are shattered by this investigation. On one hand, the survey shows us that all socioeconomic and educational levels participate equally in solidarity activities and, on the other hand, the case studies indicate that most people who participate in these activities through groups are in the productive stage of their lives and engage in some type of economic activity to make a living.

Many individuals do not consider themselves as volunteers although they fulfill our definition's profile. The generosity of Mexican people is evident in this study, but it is not shown in an organized way. It is possible that this may reflect a mistaken perception of volunteers in the popular imagination, where volunteer actions and acts of solidarity are thought only to be found within groups that provide services to third parties, generally the society's most vulnerable groups. It is also probable that what is necessary – as a further challenge – is to inform the public in general about the wide range of activities and possibilities where they can currently contribute, as well as indicating the benefits received by volunteers due to their actions.

Visibility and Promotion of Volunteer Actions and Group Organization

We think that the more public and evident the current contribution of volunteer action is and the more its potential and scope for future contributions are

³ It is the Catholic tradition to serve one's fellow men but based on the premise that *your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing*. Many people are not interested in others knowing about what they do, how much time they devote, or how much they contribute. They do not consider these to be volunteer actions but rather religious or moral duties.

emphasized, the greater participation of people in these activities. There is a challenge to promote group membership and organization, if the aim is to encourage greater citizen participation in solidarity and volunteer activities and help to forge more volunteerism. In our survey, 76% of the total Mexican population say that they do not belong to a group and 24% say they do. This does not mean membership, just participation, and the group they belong to is not necessarily an NPO. In terms of volunteer actions and acts of solidarity, out of the 66% of the Mexican adult population responded positively to the question on volunteer activity and acts of solidarity in our survey. Of these, only 44% volunteer through a formal group or legal institution.

The need for a participative and associative culture of volunteerism and solidarity was one of the main themes motivating this investigation. One of the difficulties encountered by people when organizing groups for solidarity activities may be the lack of identifying volunteer action as a social value or the mistrust about participating that persists for the average Mexican person.⁴ Another explanation of the lack of group participation is possibly rooted in the legal and fiscal difficulties that exist in Mexico and check this kind of spontaneous participation. The following recommendations come from the data and contributions of this study and may be useful for different sectors of the society.

Recommendations

For the Government

The government can play a fundamental role in providing local and national infrastructure for volunteer action. Support for legal and fiscal promotion has involved slow and unfinished processes with tendencies toward regulation and control. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges we face at this moment is the new civil society/government relationship, which is moving away from the corporativism and clientelism of the past. There is a need to provide real and tangible support, if there is real interest in greater social participation to encourage democracy and building greater social responsibility among the citizens in Mexico. Volunteer groups have traditionally provided Mexican society with services for human and social needs not covered or inadequately covered by the state. In this way, they have called attention to specific problems that are often ignored by the authorities. There are several key factors that the government needs to consider if it decides to give more support to NPOs and, specifically, to volunteer actions and acts of solidarity. We point out a few suggestions in this section:

Development of *public policies to promote these activities*, including:

⁴It is true that Mexicans generally mistrust others and trust those closest to them. When answering the question in our survey, *Would you say that most people can or can't be trusted?*, 79% said they can not be trusted and 19% said they could.

1. *Strategic development* of these actions with a defined and identifiable governmental connection to attend to these activities with possibilities for including all stakeholders in order to reach decisions by consensus with shared responsibility between the government and the citizens.
2. *Recognition and independence of volunteer actions*, in addition to resisting the temptation to use volunteer and solidarity activities for the government's own ends by means of clearly delimiting governmental and civil society activities. This would make it possible to have the freedom to form coalitions with NPOs when it is appropriate to do so – such as in cases of crisis or natural disaster – since the function of the activities of the third sector is to join in governmental social efforts and responsibilities, not replace them.
3. *Promote a culture of participation and solidarity from childhood*. The most important finding coming out of the case studies is the impact of family environment on participating in solidarity and volunteer activities. Both in community centers and in public schools, the government has the opportunity to create volunteer action programs during the first formative years so as to make solidarity activities for others a habit and part of the culture.
4. *Promote propitious environments and create visible supports*.
 - (a) National and local support with budget resources for infrastructure for volunteer initiatives by means of research about the sector.
 - (b) Promotion by public servants of these kinds of activities.
 - (c) Promotion of volunteer actions for young people. The development of specific educational programs and encouraging volunteer activities among young people, as well as systems that accredit this type of work. This is a vehicle for acquiring life experience and technical abilities as well as creating awareness about common problems.
 - (d) Promote an image of working together with private enterprise. Grant recognition and different incentives to highlight the contributions of volunteerism and solidarity to the country's development. Encourage the creation of joint initiatives with companies that promote volunteer participation. Tax incentives could also be offered to companies for supporting volunteer actions on the part of their employees.
5. *International level*. Governments can influence and demand that multilateral and international organization develop volunteer action strategies by acting together with them or asking organizations like the UN or the World Bank to develop plans and programs to promote volunteer action.

Legal and fiscal support as well as appropriate public policy on the part of the government contributes to generating confidence and participation in these activities. Legal protection for volunteers, tax incentives for donations and contributions are some key points that serve to encourage giving at all social levels. Moreover, increased citizen participation should be sought in all aspects of public administration: from planning and the creation of policy to providing services that contribute to transparency, accountability, and evaluations to keep society informed.

For the Nonprofit Sector

Companies

Some companies in Mexico promote volunteer action groups and specific volunteer programs. It may be said that this is not yet a common business practice. However, there are companies that have corporate social responsibility programs⁵ that channel donations to causes of importance, which do not necessarily involve their employees in volunteer actions. Some companies organize activities or allow their employees' work time for these labors. At times, they may donate a small amount if their employees participate as volunteers in community action groups. There is no data available about the effectiveness of these activities linked to corporations. What was captured through our study was the availability of people for solidarity or volunteer work in places close to their homes or workplaces. 71% of the population says that it would be either very likely or somewhat likely that they would do something for others as a volunteer if access to these activities was closer by. This leaves a lot to think about in terms of possibilities for developing programs where people are willing to participate as volunteers as another option for corporate social responsibility.

Volunteer Groups

NPOs in Mexico face great difficulty since competition for operational and survival funds are a problem and a constant challenge, as has already been demonstrated. Also, the lack of knowledge about the sector, and the lack of articulation among the organizations themselves may be an obstacle to their growth. From the point of view of volunteer actions and acts of solidarity, we can identify two great challenges for the third sector in Mexico.

The first is to invite a larger number of people to participate in their organizations so as to promote community solutions by means of joint volunteer actions and acts of solidarity. In the Cemefi's ENSAV survey, most of the people who participated in organizations were invited: 21% found them on their own, 20% were invited by a member of the group, and 16% were invited by a relative or acquaintance. If the sector really wants to grow, it should break with the exclusivity of the existing organizations and include more people who want to consciously contribute to the common good and causes through volunteer actions and acts of solidarity.

With this investigation, we hope to make it clear that individuals can contribute not only money but also other resources such as the time, talent, energy, and their experience, which are elements without quantitative measurement. However, as the case studies

⁵ CSR is the acronym for these corporate practices.

in this investigation show, when there is a solid commitment on the part of individuals to improve the conditions around them, the achievements are exponential.

The second challenge for the sector lies in institutionalizing and professionalizing volunteer activities. Clarity on the roles of volunteers in the organizations is a focal point of attention. Our study clearly reveals that those volunteers who hold important posts in an organization consider themselves to be an indispensable part of it and act in accordance with that belief. Volunteer activity can be a source of learning and gaining new abilities for individuals who perform it. However, structures are required to increase the value and take advantage of their labor, and not just to retain them, but search out actions to increase participation in their organizations.

Solidarity Participation

It might be mentioned here that the ENSAV survey tells us that family members of half those interviewed (45%) have also done something for others. The interviews in the qualitative part of the study corroborate this and emphasize the importance of the family in the case of Mexico in terms of a repetition of generous solidarity gestures. People who observe these kinds of activities in the family tend to repeat these actions and attitudes. One of the recommendations coming out of this study is to look for ways to incorporate these activities into the family environment.

The information for this Mexican study corresponds to information from other countries where family upbringing and volunteer actions in the family lead to people having a favorable disposition toward engaging in these kinds of activities. It is important to mention the relevant role of institutions like the church and school in these kinds of activities. In Mexico, the groups that individuals belong to most often come from religious contexts. This is the first activity mentioned by those interviewed, and it is the one where there is most solidarity and volunteer activity in the country. This subject requires more investigation and is a pending matter for future studies.

Implications and Final Reflections

This investigation indicates that volunteer work and activity have profound implications for Mexican society. It produces a series of benefits for the individuals who engage in it in five respects:

Development of social capital, good government, and democracy. Social capital is one of the products of volunteer associations, since this generates norms of reciprocity and trust. Solidarity and volunteer activities have to do with the formation of horizontal networks of participation, especially when there are face to face relationships in volunteer service to others. Insofar as there is a well-known lack of trust in strangers in the case of Mexico, it is possible to demonstrate with this study that, among the people interviewed, volunteer work and activity help to create

friendships (bringing strangers together) and promote ways of learning new things, contributing in this way to resolving situations of inequality and of forming social networks. Of those interviewed, 53% say they have made friends through volunteer work and 56% admit having learned something.

Those interviewed in this study are committed to their activities and believe that “something has to be done” to solve some community problems afflicting the country, and they act as responsible citizens of society through their volunteer participation.

Citizens' personal development. Solidarity and volunteer participation is not just about giving to others; it is also important to recognize that tangible and intangible benefits are obtained, such as friendship ties, knowledge about other people and situations, the experience of generosity and reciprocity, learning new abilities, work experience, as well as the personal satisfaction and pleasure that – the volunteers interviewed in the cases studies tell us – are also the result of this work.

Economic benefits provided. The parameters developed for our investigation have only focused on collecting information about solidarity and volunteer activities. It has been mentioned that Mexicans contribute the equivalent of 27 days of work a year. If this is multiplied by the corresponding minimum wages and compared to the total GNP for community, social, and personal services, which is a category similar to solidarity activities, the contribution would be equal to 4.7% of the GNP for 2004. This is a considerable economic contribution.

Integration of youth and excluded sectors. Mexicans over 18 years old were surveyed in the 2005 ENSAV. Although the largest number of people who do something for others are in the 30–49 age group (43%), 25% are youth (18–29), and 33% are over 50 years old. These numbers indicate the same tendency as was found in the 15 case studies of organizations, where we see that the largest number of people engaged in these activities are of productive age and at an economically active time in their lives.

Solidarity and volunteer activity creates conditions for equity and inclusion. These experiences – in which young people, retired people, and people with varied abilities or who are disabled participate – remove the image of these people as only being recipients of help and demonstrate that they too can participate in solving common problems. In order for volunteer actions to contribute more effectively to social integration, it is important to open volunteer and solidarity roles and opportunities in social organizations for young people and citizens in excluded groups.

Promotion of future employment. Volunteer action can play an important role in increasing employment opportunities for those who need them. For those looking for paid employment, these kinds of actions may, in addition to increasing self-esteem, open access to work relationship networks and provide new specific abilities for the labor market. These activities often lead to the creation of services related to social needs. A world-wide example is the creation of both public and private health-sector employment based on innovative responses by volunteers to HIV/AIDS.

In conclusion, we could say that there are great demonstrations of generosity among Mexicans through their volunteer actions and acts of solidarity. However, these need encouragement, organization, and promotion in the home, at school, and in the larger social environment so as to develop responsible and aware citizens to build a more independent, organized, and effective civil society. The promotion of

social responsibility and the path to participation in all fields of action – on the part of both government and civil society – as well as the creation of a socially responsible citizenry, depends on a greater understanding of activities like those described here.

We have demonstrated that those who consider themselves to be volunteers and to those who act in solidarity with others obtain a series of often intangible benefits that are sufficient to maintain their commitment to this activity, at times on a full-time basis, and in other cases on an individual basis. We have discovered that, generally speaking, there is a great lack of awareness in Mexico about the possibilities that exist for participation in acts of solidarity and volunteer action. There is also a need to reveal the potential of these activities for present-day society and for future generations by means of promoting opportunities for participation so that those who wish to focus their energy on volunteer activity may do so.

We are aware that these results represent the first step to a more profound knowledge of the world of solidarity and volunteer activity in Mexico. The definitions chosen for this investigation were broad, in accordance with international parameters, with the intention of obtaining information that would make possible comparisons with other countries and also reflect the reality of Mexico.

A series of questions to be answered by future research have been uncovered by this exploratory and descriptive study. Many questions remain unanswered about this activity in Mexico. In general terms, we could say that we still need to find out more about the ethics, the representative character, and the social impact of these activities. Another pending matter is getting to know more about the professionalization of volunteers in these organizations, as well as the processes involving those engaging in volunteer solidarity work for others who do not belong to social organizations.

New questions for research and related issues about these activities arise at the same time as the following issues need to be resolved: What is the most effective way to take advantage of volunteer work and time? What are the relationships like between volunteers and employees within the same organization? Why do many Mexicans choose to engage in volunteer work in an isolated way? What are the mechanisms that people expressing solidarity use to consolidate a civil society organization in Mexico? It is our hope and expectation that this study may stimulate interest among experts on the subject and establish a point of departure for generating greater knowledge in this regard.

The development of citizenship and participation must correspond to our customs and social norms. We know that, in the end, we act according to what matters to us, in consequence with our scale of values. In a much broader sense, the recently deceased anthropologist Clifford Geertz tells us that for actions to be part of a culture, they need to become integrated with everyday life, since the “ways of society are the substance of culture.”⁶ In order for volunteer actions and acts of solidarity to become everyday values and guide our behavior to really become that “substance,” Geertz mentions, it will be essential to create more opportunities for giving and helping others that are within the reach of everyone.

⁶Geertz, C. (1973). *La interpretación de las culturas*. Barcelona: Gedisa, p. 38.