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Corporate Social Responsibility Response During the COVID-19 Crisis in Mexico

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3.1 Introduction

The SARS-CoV2 pandemic and its corresponding disease, COVID-19, has drastically challenged both developed and emerging countries, provoking a variety of responses as there has been no observable international coordination, not even at a regional level as might have been expected. Beyond the extreme stress the pandemic has placed on health systems, the economic consequences of social distancing will transform the world for years to come. As the pandemic progressed globally Latin American countries had the opportunity to observe how China, Europe, and the United States reacted to the disease and thus had the potential to be better prepared for it. However, even this advantage was insufficient in allowing Latin America to develop an improved response to the pandemic.

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Corporate social responsibility initiatives are designed to help organizations implement strategies that reflect a CSR philosophy. Companies implement this type of initiative to act ethically and improve their image, either in response to stakeholders' pressures or to improve customer satisfaction (Ortas et al. 2015). The COVID-19 crisis represents an opportunity for companies to demonstrate their commitment to CSR. This research aims to explore the CSR response of companies during the first six months of the pandemic in Mexico.

3.2 Context

Demographic context. Mexico is a Latin American country located in North America. In 2015, its population was estimated at almost 120 million people (INEGI 2020a) (126 million people in 2019), with a GNP per capita of 9763 USD (11,085 USD in 2019) (Statista 2020); the population on average had 9.2 years of schooling (INEGI 2020a). In 2018, more than 40% of the population was considered to be living in poverty, 7% in extreme poverty (Coneval 2020). In 2020, it was estimated that 6.6% of the population spoke at least one of the 68 Mexican indigenous languages and 364 variants (INEGI 2020b).

Economic context. Mexico was already in economic recession before the pandemic with a slowdown of industrial activity, a reduction in foreign investment, uncertainty with government economic policies, and a reduction of government jobs themselves due to austerity measures. In 2019, the country registered 6.4 million enterprises, 97.3% being micro, small, or medium-sized enterprises, with 63% in the informal economy (Excélsior 2020). With the pandemic, tourism, one of the main sources of jobs and foreign currency for the country, has collapsed (El Universal 2020a, 2020b). The fall of petroleum prices has worsened this crisis as Mexico depends to a great extent on the income generated by its state-owned oil company PEMEX. Mexico participates in supply chains connected to the United States, China, and other countries (El Universal 2020a); due to the interruption in world supply chains and reduction in global demand, the pandemic has triggered the most severe economic crisis in the history of Mexico with more people falling into

sub-employment and poverty than ever before. In June 2020, it was estimated that COVID-19 left 11.3 million people in work suspension, with no income and uncertainty about their employment. Additionally, 3.5 million people lost their jobs or had to close their businesses. Approximately, 82% of people affected work in the informal economy (Ponce 2020).

Social context. As a result of Spanish colonialism, Mexican society is highly stratified, with the rich enjoying great privileges because of close relationships with political power. In contrast, the poor experience all kinds of privations, hunger, and discrimination, working in the informal economy with little or no access to education or health services. Mexican society is also based on strong ties within both the nuclear and extended family. Families frequently get together, especially in the case of strong need. Family parties and funerals are events that cannot be missed. During the first few months of the pandemic, information about the coronavirus and COVID-19 was distorted extensively in social networks; many people believed the coronavirus was not actually real. The fact that many people in the informal economy must go out every day to work, a strong family culture, and the distortion of COVID-19 information explain to a great extent why many people did not follow the recommendations issued by the federal government, particularly those urging people to stay at home and keep socially distanced. Consequently, the disease spread beyond the worst of expectations (El Universal 2020c).

Political context. Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), current president of Mexico for the period 2018–2024, entered the presidency with complete support from the unprivileged sectors and in clear rupture with the previous governments of PRI (2012–2018) and PAN (2000–2012). His political party, MORENA, controls the National Congress (Chávez 2018) and groups together many left-political interests. AMLO calls his period the Fourth Transformation (4T) in reference to the main milestones in Mexican history: Independence (1810–1821), Reform (1857–1861), and Revolution (1910–1917). The president has promised to fight corruption and criminality. His government has forced big corporations to pay taxes, an obligation many of them had been avoiding for years through lobbying former governments (Mendoza 2019). Privileges to the rich have been reduced and the relationship

between the president and the “entrepreneurial cupola”¹ has become toxic as a result, with many entrepreneurs now forming part of the political opposition (Gómez 2020). The upcoming elections of governors, mayors, and congress members in 2021 (INE 2020) complicate the political scenario as the president wants to strengthen confidence in his electoral base while his political rivals try to undermine his position by emphasizing how badly he has managed the pandemic, the economy, national security, and the political process.

Environmental context. Even as the world trend is for renewable sources of energy in replacement of fossil sources, and the prices of petroleum reach a historical minimum, AMLO insists on restoring the past glory of PEMEX and pushes investment in petroleum exploration, extraction, and refinement. Recently, he has retracted some of the energy reforms of the previous government to impede private firms from investing in renewable energy sources such as electricity. This measure was taken because it was believed that the entrepreneurial sector had colluded with the past government to take over the energy sector. AMLO is in favor of government control of strategic natural resources, although he says he is not against entrepreneurial activity (El Universal 2020d).

Health system. Since the beginning of his presidency, AMLO has faced significant problems in Mexico’s health system: insufficient hospital infrastructure, with unfinished and abandoned hospitals all over the country, major inequalities in the population’s access to health care, and a lack of medicine, medical equipment, and medical staff, among other issues. In 2018, it was estimated that 16% of the Mexican population had no access to health care (Rodríguez 2019) and at the end of 2018 almost 10% of hospitals were still closed because of the 2017 earthquakes (El Universal 2018).

¹ Entrepreneurial cupola refers to the relevant associations and lobbies of the main large-scale private companies.

3.3 Method

Based on a content analysis of text news reports ordered chronologically from the beginning of the pandemic, this research aims to analyze the evolution of the CSR response in Mexico during the first six months of the pandemic throughout five periods: (1) before the first case was confirmed, (2) Phase I—imported cases confirmed, (3) Phase II—local spread and confinement, (4) Phase III—exponential spread and opening, and (5) adopting the “new normal”. Figure 3.1 shows the accumulated cases, deaths, and periods of analysis.

News articles were obtained from the major online newspapers in Mexico according to website rankings. Table 3.1 shows the list of online newspapers with the number of news articles per period included in the sample. News articles were obtained after searching for the following keywords: “Responsabilidad Social Empresarial”, “Empresa Socialmente Responsable”, “COVID-19”, and “Coronavirus”. News articles obtained were then reviewed to evaluate their content for relevance. Those articles were then saved in .txt format to be imported into Weft QDA software for content analysis.

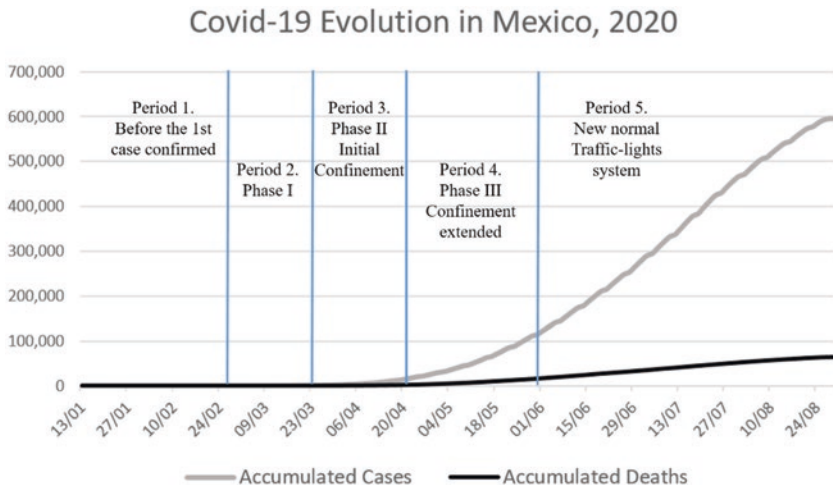


Fig. 3.1 COVID-19 Evolution in Mexico in 2020. Source: Authors' own work with data from <https://coronavirus.gob.mx/datos/#DownZCSV>

Table 3.1 Newspapers and number of news articles describing CSR initiatives actually cited in this research

Newspaper	Period					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>El Economista</i>	0		1	1	12	14
<i>Excélsior</i>	0		1		2	3
<i>El Universal</i>	0	1	3			4
<i>Milenio</i>	0			1	4	5
<i>El Financiero</i>	0	1		1	2	4
<i>Publimetro</i>	0		1	2		3
<i>La Jornada</i>	0		1			1
<i>Informador</i>	0		1			1
Total	0	2	8	5	20	35

Source: Own research

Content analysis was performed to identify CSR initiatives implemented by companies in response to the pandemic. Codification was done by means of categorizing the information in the articles based on the declared objectives of the initiative as stated by the company according to the articles.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Period 1: Before the first case confirmed in the Mexican territory.

This period starts with the discovery of COVID-19 and ends on February 28, the day the first case was reported in Mexico. During this period, no news articles discussing the disease and corporate social responsibility were identified. Even if certain CSR initiatives could have been anticipated based on the experience of China, Italy, or Spain, no actions were reported, not even from multi-national corporations operating in those territories.

3.4.2 Period 2: Phase I, imported cases confirmed.

This period starts when the first imported case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Mexico on February 28 and ends on March 24, when the

government declared that most new infections occurred locally, and confinement began.

During this period, few news articles appeared reporting CSR initiatives in response to the pandemic. The entrepreneurial cupola, represented by the CCE (Consejo Coordinador Empresarial—Entrepreneurial Coordinator Council) made a call to the population to remain calm and avoid panic buying or cornering products as the entrepreneurial sector was committed to maintaining normal economic and social activity regardless of the public health measures that might be implemented (El Universal 2020e). However, the Ministry of Labor (Secretaría del Trabajo) reported that some companies began firing employees without justification (Guadarrama and Páramo 2020). One big company in the restaurant sector suggested its workers could stay at home for 30 days without any salary in order to protect their jobs (El Universal 2020f). One company in the Southeast of Mexico was reported as offering basic food products to people in marginalized zones, in cooperation with civil society organizations (Gallardo 2020).

3.4.3 Period 3: Phase II, local spread and confinement.

This period starts with the confinement established by the federal government on March 24 and ends on April 21 with the expected end of the “Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia” (National Period of Health Distancing). Even if this period was extended until May 30 (Urrutia and Jiménez 2020), we decided to maintain this phase in the analysis as it was originally planned because it created certain expectations that could have affected companies’ decisions in terms of CSR initiatives. Confinement meant closing schools and all non-essential activities and staying home as much as possible, measures that were reinforced at different levels throughout the country (Enciso 2020).

At the time, confinement was seen as the most effective strategy to reduce contagion and ensure that the existing medical infrastructure could absorb a surplus of patients without collapsing. However, a few months later confinement was revealed to have been implemented too early (see Fig. 3.1), provoking enormous economic consequences.

During this period, CSR initiatives started to appear throughout Mexico. These initiatives can be classified in five types: (1) related to protecting the health and wellbeing of employees and their families, (2) related to helping the population in need, (3) related to protecting the natural environment, (4) related to assuring the supply of their own products and services, even in challenging conditions, and (5) related to expanding the hospitals' capacity to face the pandemic.

Initiatives of the first type include: working from home when possible (especially for workers in vulnerable groups—with pre-existing diseases or older than 60 years), staggered working hours, adaptation of work facilities to reduce social contact and exposure, sanitizing gel in work areas, use of masks and social distancing, private transportation to reduce exposure, and a declared commitment to preserving jobs and salaries (El Universal 2020g, 2020h).

Initiatives of the second type include: offering basic food products to people in marginalized zones, media campaigns to better inform poor people and reduce the spread of the disease, offering food and hygiene kits for small children living in poverty, digital technology for medical services for poor people with diabetes, and facilitating crowdfunding for specific needs (La Jornada 2020; El Universal 2020i).

As for the third type, it was reported that an organization of plastic recycling companies developed a recycled and recyclable body bag to be used during the pandemic. These companies offered a source of income for poor and homeless people that collected plastic from the streets. One producer mentioned that in case the bags were not needed, they could be reprocessed to produce garbage bags (Informador 2020).

With regard to the fourth type of initiative, some companies in the food sector adopted the compromise of maintaining prices and assuring the supply of their products to help families attend to their basic needs (El Universal 2020i). Another company committed to offering financial services to the poor (Díaz 2020a).

As for the fifth type, one initiative brought together the efforts of companies, educational institutions, government institutions, and civil society organizations to adapt available spaces to receive and treat COVID-19 patients (Publímetro 2020).

In many cases, these initiatives were developed in coordination with civil society organizations and the local government at different levels. Micro and small companies were praised by the Mexican president for protecting employment and salaries, giving an example of responsibility to larger corporations (Guadarrama and Páramo 2020).

Anti-CSR initiatives were also detected during this period: companies firing employees simply for sneezing or because a relative had the disease, not allowing vulnerable people to work from home even when it was possible, and unobserved measures of containment or social distancing. Shamefully, several physicians and nurses reported being insulted, threatened, and battered by public officials, companies, and neighbors (Toribio and Nava 2020).

3.4.4 Period 4: Phase III, exponential spread and opening.

This period starts with the extension of the “Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia” on April 21 and ends on May 30, when the government declared its end.

Paradoxically, this period was characterized by the initial exponential spread of COVID-19 and at the same time the opening of the economy after the end of the social distancing campaign. During this period, confinement was substituted with a “traffic lights” system that aimed to indicate the degree of seriousness of the disease in every state and region. In this system, containment measures would be designed and adapted according to the local situation (Gobierno de México 2020).

During this period, CSR initiatives spread throughout the nation. These initiatives can be classified in four types: (1) related to protecting the health and wellbeing of customers, employees, and their families, (2) related to helping the population in need, (3) related to helping the supply chain when it is composed of small businesses at risk, and (4) related to supporting the activities of first-line pandemic fighters.

For the first type, some companies put up barriers to separate customers from workers in local stores, implemented sanitary protocols established by health authorities, and reorganized their activities to reduce

social contact. Some companies allowed workers from vulnerable groups to stay at home and keep their jobs and salary (Curiel 2020).

For the second type, companies in the restaurant sector offered their food products through food banks to reach relatives of hospitalized people, indigenous communities, and poor children. Other companies offered support for elderly people with chronic diseases in rural communities through civil society organizations. Some companies offered food and training to construction workers that lost jobs because of the pandemic. One company, in association with a university, offered psychological support by telephone. Other companies donated money and food to civil society organizations that were active in various sectors (Mireles 2020; Campos 2020).

For the third type, one beverage company offered gift cards to be exchanged for its products in restaurants and bars (Campos 2020). A big bakery company offered support to small grocery stores by providing masks and reinforcing its credit policy. It also offered IT services so small businesses could receive credit cards and food vouchers, sell mobile telephony credit, and receive payments for services. A company in the cosmetic industry offered coupons to be exchanged in beauty salons, they also offered online training and sanitizing gel, and withheld payments until reopening. An association created an initiative to allow small businesses to offer their products to hospitals to protect jobs and salaries (Curiel 2020).

For the fourth type of CSR initiative, some companies donated their products to help medical staff and police officers. Some transformed their production processes to make this possible. For instance, a brewery produced cans of water for police officers and antibacterial gel derived from non-alcoholic beer (Sánchez 2020). A company in the car industry started producing medical equipment to be donated to public hospitals. A beverage company started producing recycled plastic masks to be donated to different institutions and, in association with another company in the alcoholic beverages industry, donated sanitizing alcohol (Campos 2020). A company in the cosmetics industry started producing sanitizing gel to be donated to public hospitals (Curiel 2020). Companies donated ventilators to public hospitals as well as medical equipment for hospitals in rural areas. In different sectors, companies donated their own products to medical staff of public hospitals, such as food, writing devices, personal health products, antibacterial gel, and masks (Mireles 2020; Curiel 2020).

3.4.5 Period 5: Adopting the “new normal”.

This period starts on May 30, when the government declared the end of social distancing. During this period the “traffic lights” system was still in operation even if some state governments (from the opposition parties) saw the system as a tool of political control and influence in advance of the 2021 elections. This period ends on August 30 when our search for newspaper articles was closed.

The CSR initiatives in this period can be classified in six types: (1) related to protecting the health and wellbeing of customers, employees, and their families, (2) related to helping the population in need, (3) related to protecting the natural environment, (4) related to helping the supply chain when it is composed of small businesses at risk, (5) related to supporting the activities of the first-line fighters, and (6) related to preparing people in need to reactivate their own economy.

For the first type, companies have implemented the recommendations of health authorities including: working from home when possible; workplace sanitization; use of antibacterial gel; masks during working hours; information in the workplace; gloves; adaptation in circulation within the workplace; no use of meeting rooms; expanding e-commerce; hygiene protocols to protect clients, workers, and their families; and a commitment to protecting jobs and salaries. Using their databases and a questionnaire, some companies detected potential COVID-19 patients and put them in contact with medical specialists (Mata 2020).

For the second type, companies donated money through civil society organizations to offer hygiene kits, food, and education for children in poverty (Ramírez 2020a). Some companies offered digital technology to people with diabetes. Other companies donated money to provide basic food products for people in need in rural communities. Through specialized organizations some companies offered support to youth to prevent criminal activity (Ramírez 2020b). Some initiatives coordinated different companies to offer solidarity cards to people that lost their jobs with up to 3000 pesos to buy products in supermarkets; these cards were sent with the help of local delivery companies (De la Rosa 2020). Creatively, a football club invited its fans to pay for a cardboard silhouette with their photograph to be located in the stadium and donated the proceeds (El Financiero 2020).

In the third type, one company donated the profits from its ice cream made for dogs to feed abandoned dogs and cats, a population that has grown significantly during the pandemic (Díaz 2020b). A company in the packaging industry donated modular spaces for medical treatment made of recycled materials (Díaz 2020c).

In relation to the fourth type, helping the supply chain when it is composed of small businesses at risk, some companies prioritized contracts with local suppliers to protect jobs. Others donated food and beverage products to bars and restaurants so they could reopen. They also offered to pay part of the delivery costs of their products. Some companies offered training to restaurant staff so they could amplify their talents and improve commercial strategies through social networks. A major brewery created an initiative to offer tickets to consumers in a buy one get one free scheme (Díaz 2020d, 2020e).

For the fifth type, some companies offered their own food products to medical staff (Ramírez 2020c), other companies offered to sanitize hospitals and public spaces in zones of high risk using their own equipment and materials (Méndez 2020). One company in the print business donated printers, paper, and ink so that physicians and nurses treating COVID-19 patients could show their faces and build a human connection with their patients (Díaz 2020f). Some companies offered flexible modular solutions to public hospitals so they could increase their bed capacity (Díaz 2020g). Other companies have donated thousands of medical kits through different foundations. Some companies offered monetary donations to the Mexican Red Cross. Others offered millions of pesos to acquire specialized medical equipment for public hospitals (Ramírez 2020d). An alliance of different companies created a crowd-funding campaign that multiplied the donations of their customers by a factor of four so they could buy protection medical equipment for public hospitals (Ramírez 2020d). Some non-manufacturing institutions started producing masks to be donated to hospitals (Santinelli 2020). An alliance of several companies, public institutions, and universities quickly developed a ventilator that is practical and efficient. Ventilators were acquired by other companies and then donated to public hospitals (Del Pozo 2020). A packaging company donated recycled material as well as

instructions for building modular dormitories for medical personnel in public hospitals (Díaz 2020c).

For the sixth type, some companies offered food and training for construction workers who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Others offered crowdfunding assistance to emerging artists so they could reach new online audiences (El Economista 2020). In association with education institutions, large companies offered training to women entrepreneurs so they could grow and improve their small businesses (EF Branded Media 2020).

Figure 3.2 summarizes our research findings and the evolution of CSR initiatives as the pandemic expanded in Mexico. We can observe that CSR initiatives multiplied and diversified during this period, starting from offering basic food products to the poor and protecting the health

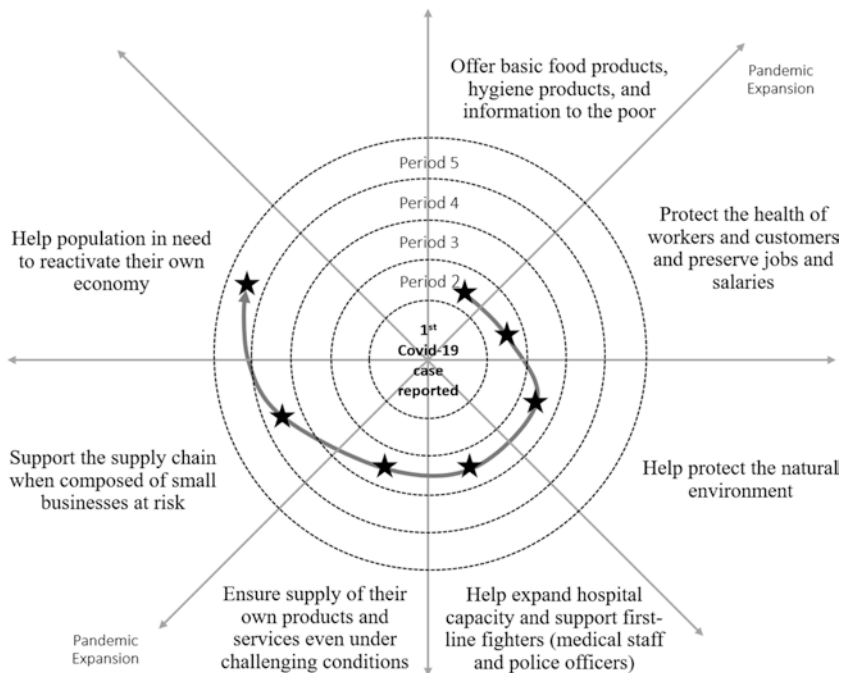


Fig. 3.2 Evolution of CSR initiatives during the first six months of the SARS-CoV2 in Mexico (February 28–August 30). Source: Authors' own work

of workers and customers and preserving jobs and salaries in Period 2 to helping the population in need to reactivate the economy in Period 5. In the graph, initiatives are registered in the period they were identified for the first time; however, in most cases, initiatives were expected to last more than one period.

3.5 Conclusions

This research analyzes the CSR response of companies during the first six months of the SARS-CoV2 pandemic in Mexico, and particularly, the evolution of these initiatives through five periods: (1) before the first confirmed case, (2) Phase I—imported cases confirmed, (3) Phase II—local spread and confinement, (4) Phase III—exponential spread and opening, and (5) adopting the “new normal”. Enterprises have shown an evolution in the number and type of initiatives they have undertaken.

While no CSR initiatives in response to COVID-19 were reported in period 1, in period 2 one company undertaking this type of action was identified. In the following periods, an important growth of CSR initiatives was observed not only in the number of companies and initiatives but also in the diversification of such initiatives, from helping poor people meet their immediate needs to helping people in need reactivate the economy. This diversification includes seven different types after a relatively short period of time, as shown in Fig. 3.2. This trend in company behavior might indicate that companies will continue developing a greater number of CSR initiatives, perhaps oriented to other aspects not observed here.

Many companies have disappeared with the corresponding loss of jobs and a drastic decline in economic and social welfare. Most enterprises in a fragile financial position have focused only on survival and put aside any effort on CSR. The pandemic has detonated the worst economic crisis in the history of Mexico but also a renewed interest in humanitarian and environmental actions. It is expected that the economy might recuperate to the level of 2018 within six years. The Canada-US-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), a renegotiation of NAFTA that was enacted on July 1, 2020, is expected to play a significant role in this endeavor (Forbes

México 2020). Social consequences of the pandemic are still to be seen beyond the thousands of deaths. However, some positive effects can also be observed, such as the capacity to act in an organized manner and bring together enterprises, government, and non-government institutions, in the pursuit of superior objectives.

3.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Our primary limitation in this research is the use of newspapers as our main source of information. Newspapers might have their own interests and consequently present facts in a non-objective manner, as is the case when articles are paid for by companies. Also, the use of only a few free-access online newspapers imposes a limit to the possibility of having a wider variety of information and perspectives. Finally, information about different initiatives was not validated (by triangulation, for instance) to confirm if those initiatives were carried out or not. Further research on the topic could include additional sources of information such as more online newspapers, specialized magazines and websites, company websites, and those of civil society organizations and the government.

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