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#Verificado19s
A Citizens' Experience after the 2017 Mexico City Earthquake[1]

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On September 19, 1985, Mexico City experienced an 8.1- magnitude earthquake that lasted two minutes, with its epicenter on the border between the states of Michoacán and Guerrero, about 400 kilometers away. Remembering the devastation it wrought is still horrifying. The exact number of deaths is unknown, but estimates put it at about 10 000. The ledger of the authorities' mistakes and irresponsible actions is extensive, the reason the citizenry had to go to the rescue of people trapped under the rubble. After this terrible experience, building codes were changed, the seismic alert system was implemented, and public policy was changed to be better prepared for a next earthquake.

Exactly 32 years later, on September 19, 2017, the city experienced another quake, this time measuring 7.1, but with an epicenter that was closer: 120 kilometers away on the border between the states of Morelos and Puebla. This time the number of deaths in Mexico City was much smaller, 228. But the federal and local authorities' response capability once again left much to be desired, despite the fact that the capital has sufficient resources to plan an emergency response. So, the citizenry mobilized yet again.

When we felt the quake and saw on social media that damage was considerable, the first reaction of many of us was to want to help, to feel useful. The images from 1985 came back to us, reviving the horror, since for an entire generation the damage from that quake had no parallel. That was the impulse behind the birth of #Verificado19s,

a citizens' experience that we felt was obligatory in the face of both urgent need and government ineptitude.

From the afternoon after the quake, enormous confusion reigned about the state of things. We knew about important building collapses with victims, about damage, about problems with services, and about the urgency of support. But what was being published on social and mainstream media was plagued with incomplete data and even errors and fake news. Many people wanted to help, but didn't know how. The government was absent. Disorganization was rampant in the city.

Volunteers or materials (shovels, pick-axes, helmets, buckets, food, etc.) were being requested for places that really did not need them. In other places, material arrived in such great quantity that it was simply piled up and no one redistributed it to other disaster sites where it was required. The lack of coordination was exasperating, since

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every minute that went by was vital for anyone trapped and trying to survive.

It became clear that to help, to be able to channel the efforts of the thousands of people willing to lend support, trustworthy, verified information was urgently needed. A group of citizens, women and men of all ages, met with the idea of supporting in the emergency by creating a map of collapses since official information was simply insufficient. At first, we thought that technological tools would make it possible to bring together the different government data bases that pointed to collapse sites and contrast them with what was published on the social media to identify needs and foster active participation by the citizenry using a cellular phone app to report what was missing, what there was in excess, and where.

To that end, we established a physical site for coordinating operations. Little by little, word got around through message groups of civic organizations or previously-existing mobilizations that made it possible to contact trustworthy individuals with organizational experience. "Meet you at Horizontal," was the key for people to go to a cultural center that loaned its facilities.[2] A tight-knit network of contacts attracted many other people who wanted to know how to help.

That is how the idea of #Verificado19s came into being. The commitment was simple: to disseminate only information verified by what people saw in the field. To do that, a group of urban cyclists was fundamental, since they could move around and report in real time what was needed for rescue efforts.

We soon realized that in the field, needs changed in a matter of minutes, and time was the enemy of finding people alive under the rubble. So, those of us involved in #Verificado19s took on the task of dealing with the needs to the best of our abilities, making a priority of turning over everything necessary to rescue workers so they could focus solely on saving lives. We conceived of the collapse sites like a body open on an operating table, where doc-

tors —that is, the rescue workers— put out their hands, saying, "scalpel," "clamp," or "suction." That meant that it was our job to get those materials and put them in their hands so they could continue with the operation.

So, spontaneously, WhatsApp chats were created that gathered information about transport, donations, collapses. As the monitors on site told us about the needs, we moved to see where we could get them. Indeed, an organized work flow began to emerge:

1) *Needs were identified by several sources*: a) information from monitors who sent lists of what the rescue workers asked for at the collapse sites; b) on social media, volunteers identified requests by monitoring Twitter and Facebook; c) through group chats that did similar work to #Verificado19s's (which might have been just as useful, but unfortunately were not as visible); d) through Google forms filled in by the public. If necessary, people were asked to verify information in the field.

2) *Once needs were identified, the materials were sought, or volunteers were found to take them to collapse sites* through a) chats among field monitors who could get or even directly purchase what was needed; b) chats of monitors posted at different donation sites around the city, particularly the Pilares center located on the street of the same name, for everything tool-related; and the Mexico Park center for medicine, medical equipment, and food; and in the stores at other collapse sites where volunteers organized inventories and updated requirements; c) postcards designed by graphic designers requesting anything that had not been acquired; these postcards circulated on Twitter accounts of organizations participating in the #Verificado19s efforts so the general public could get what was necessary with support from the media, particularly radio, and "influencers" who made the information go viral. The postcards included the day and time of the request so people would know when the information had been posted.

3) *Transport was sought to deliver materials* through networks of cyclers, motorcyclists, and transport drivers who organized during the emergency and with whom we had direct contact; through #Verificado19s volunteers who put their private means at the ser-

4) *Material delivery was verified* with the support of volunteers who coordinated the three previous points from their computers: detecting needs, localizing providers, and transport and delivery to the site.

The process of requesting, procuring, and delivering items could take seconds, minutes, or hours, depending on the complexity of the materials required, their cost, or their location. As time went on, the needs became much more specialized and specific. So, we received circular diamond saw blades, crowbars, radios, booties for the canine half of search-and-rescue dog teams (rescue dogs), lifelines, 100-ton cranes, thermographic cameras, and an endless list of specialized items that many of us had never heard of before and that the government could not provide effectively and efficiently.

Our list of phone contacts had never skyrocketed as rapidly as it did in those few days. Most were a first name and a word that would remind you how that person could help and/or where he/she was located. For example, it included Ana "Narvarte neighborhood," Jorge "tools," Jime "Parque México," Ricardo "Álvaro Obregón site," Frank "food," Josu "transport," "The Architect," "Street lights," Kim "motorcycles," etc.

Everyone contributed what he or she could. Many volunteers came to us thanks to publicity by organizations; to university professors who invited their students to work on the initiative; thanks to people who had access to the media and who helped enormously to make the efforts visible; and even public officials who, frustrated and desperate at government paralysis, preferred to lend their support through our platform. In the end, friends, family, acquaintances, people who wanted their work to be useful. The chats were active day and night. When we finally got a few hours to rest, the adrenaline kept us awake. We would see imaginary, unintelligible conversations on the screen that we felt the need to respond to.

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When we would wake up or just get back to work because we hadn't been able to fall asleep, the telephones could have up to 600 unread messages. There was nothing for it but to hurry to try to catch up.

Beyond Mexico City, #Verificado19sEstados

The emergency was not limited to Mexico City; the September 19 earthquake hit Morelos, the State of Mexico, and Puebla very hard, not to mention the consequences of the previous September 7, 8.2-magnitude quake and its hundreds of aftershocks in Chiapas and Oaxaca, which also demanded attention. That is how #Verificado19s-Estados (#VerifiedStates) was created, which took on the task of sending aid to remote areas through a committed citizenry, whose priority was not pulling people out from under rubble, but dealing with the urgent needs of thousands who had been left homeless.

Citizens in the Face Of Government Incapacity

Verifying information, working under pressure for hours and hours makes us susceptible to making mistakes. To minimize them, we had a kind of mantra that something is verified only if it fulfills one of the following two criteria: 1) You saw it yourself, or 2) You were told by at least two different people that they themselves had seen it. Anything else was not verified. With this constant reminder, we became more efficient in using our energy and that of everyone who used this platform to channel their aid. We saw how many people in other chats and networks began to make a habit of requesting confirmed information.

We were invaded by frustration at the local government's incapacity. Days after the tragedy, it still had not established mechanisms to resolve the most urgent needs in collapse sites, collection centers, and shelters. The famous city governmental C5 virtual monitoring and decision-making center issued reports that they spewed out on a computer (in Word) and printed with absolutely no systemization. In fact, the maps that appeared on government command center screens were those generated by #Verificado19s, and they used our postcards to channel

rescue efforts in the absence of an agile, swift system of their own. Nasa itself used our maps to do their analysis, and not those of an official source.[3]

What is more, the international rescue teams had no local authority to coordinate with to do their job in a trustworthy way, and they used #Verificado19s as an information source and even to procure the equipment and material they needed. To cap it all off, our volunteers found food for police officers and members of the military, since the government did not provide it. This meant that a great deal of time and energy was lost that could have been used to deal with the emergency.

Among the #Verificado19s volunteers were a handful of public officials, who, desperate to be able to act and highly committed, found that our initiative was a useful way of helping. Thanks to them, it was possible to get permission to be in ground zero areas, get first-hand information, and even mobilize resources.

On October 1, #Verificado19s published a communiqué to the citizenry. After days of running to and fro to deal with the emergency, we took a breath to pose questions that we had been asking ourselves the whole time. To summarize all of them in one, we can ask, "Why, with so much money and resources at its disposal, is the government not organized to save lives, and, therefore, why did the citizenry have to replace it?"[4]

Lessons Learned

From the standpoint of the citizens' experience, clearly, each person's talents and possibilities offer many ways of helping during an emergency. Creating relationships of trust beforehand allows us to use them and organize more easily at moments of the greatest need. Civic organizations, networks that exist to work on other aspects of public life, were key for quickly coordinating efforts. This emergency has touched us profoundly and we have made dozens of dear, dear friends, many of them without ever even meeting in person.

It goes without saying that dozens of citizens' initiatives emerged during the emergency. Thousands worked tirelessly, not just us. Some people reached a wider public, but the important thing was each person's contribution, many of them anonymous, helping those who needed help at the time and still do today.

While, even without any preparation, the public went out into the street to organize to save lives, the government looks like an insensitive observer. For people, distance is no obstacle, and they show us that you don't only work on the streets, but can also lend support at a distance, in other cities and countries, thanks to the proximity made possible by communication, so that people on site have everything they need to carry out their important tasks.

All levels of government were and continue to be incapable of serving the population. In fact, they are organized to do business and win elections, not to save lives or to respond to the needs of reconstruction. That is why real accountability is necessary, as is truly establishing responsibilities and reconstruction in concert with different neighborhood, social, and civic organizations, from the standpoint that each of them is familiar with and from which they can best contribute.

The September 19 earthquake and the efforts in #Verificado19s have profoundly changed us simply because they have shown that many, many people are willing to put everything on hold to help others who perhaps we have never even seen before but who need us. However, that powerful impetus will dissolve if we don't know how to organize, if we do not manage to connect and listen to each other, and, above all, if we are not able to trust each other. In this emergency, we learned to trust each other and work together without being naïve, but knowing that we can do very little alone. At #Verificado19s, that trust was built by managing information responsibly and working with a great deal of love. ‖M

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Notes

1 The authors are among the hundreds of volunteers who participated in #Verificado19s.

2 This refers to the Horizontal Cultural Center, in Mexico City's Roma Neighborhood, https://horizontal.mx/que-es/. With regard to collaboration with the #Verificado19s volunteers, see https://horizontal.mx/verificado19s/. [Editor's Note.]

3 Alan Buis, "Nasa-Produced Damage Maps May Aid Mexico Quake Response," Nasa, September 21, 2017, https://www.nasa.gov/feature/jpl/nasa-produced-damage-maps-may-aid-mexico-quake-response, accessed February 28, 2018.

4 See the communiqué at https://twitter.com/verificado19s/status/914626035865362432/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.buzzfeed.com%2Fjosehernandez%2Fverificado-19-ese. [Editor's Note].