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Claremont McKenna College

Community-Based Disaster Risk Management and COVID-19:
How Local NGOs in Latin America Adapted to the Pandemic

submitted to
Professor Peter Uvin

by
Emily Pugh

for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic posed new challenges for communities across Latin America: lack of access to potable water and food, loss of jobs and lack of access to technology now needed for children to attend school. By interviewing different leaders of NGOs throughout the continent, I was able to find out how local NGOs were adapting their typical activities to help their communities face these new and worsening challenges. While the NGOs in this study do not primarily focus on disaster relief, each adapted their initiatives to deal with the current needs of the community they serve. Some were able to hold their skill-building workshops online while others raised money to hand out food, cellular cards and school supplies to families with children. Regardless of their original mission, these NGOs showed remarkable adaptation in helping their communities weather the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

KW: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management, COVID-19 response, local non-governmental organizations, community-based approaches

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I would like to also thank my mom for always being available over the phone when I needed a pep talk. Thank you for always knowing what to say.

Last but not least, I would like to give a huge thank you to the organizations in this study for their time and frequent correspondence. Each of the leaders I interviewed were gracious with their time, even amidst one of the most turbulent times their organizations have seen. I thank each of them for their hard work and dedication to the communities they serve.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: How Local NGOs Should Respond to Crises	3
Introduction to the Literature Review	
Community-Based Organizations vs. Local Nongovernmental Organizations	
Responding to Disasters: The Shift from Community-Based Approaches to the Government and Back	
Defining Risk and Disaster	
Putting it all together: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management	
Chapter Two: Organizations of Study	12
Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee – Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador	12
Mission and Activities	
Person Interviewed: Darling Kaniras	
Iracambi – Minas Gerais, Rosário da Limeira, Brazil	14
Mission and Activities	
Person Interviewed: Rogéria Castro	
MySmallHelp Peru – Ollantaytambo, Peru	15
Mission and Activities	
Person Interviewed: Jessica Sanchez	
Voluntario Global – Buenos Aires, Argentina	16
Mission and Activities	
Person Interviewed: Valeria Gracia	
Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. – Oaxaca, Mexico	17
Mission and Activities	
Person Interviewed: Bárbara Lazcano	
Chapter Three: How Each Organization Adapted to the Pandemic	19

Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee	19
How COVID-19 Impacted the Community	
Challenges Posed by COVID-19	
How Tayu Jee Adapted	
Iracambi	22
How COVID-19 Impacted the Community	
Challenges Posed by COVID-19	
How Iracambi Adapted	
MySmallHelp Peru	24
How COVID-19 Impacted the Community	
Challenges Posed by COVID-19	
How MySmallHelp Peru Adapted	
Voluntario Global	27
How COVID-19 Impacted the Community	
Challenges Posed by COVID-19	
How Voluntario Global Adapted	
Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C.	30
How COVID-19 Impacted the Community	
Challenges Posed by COVID-19	
How Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. Adapted	
Overall Analysis	33
Conclusion and Further Research	34
Acronyms and Abbreviations	36
Bibliography	37

Introduction

I had been planning to study the efficacy of ecotourism as a model for sustainable development. But then the pandemic happened. Organizations like the one I planned to study were suddenly scrambling to help their communities with an entirely new challenge: their *immediate survival*.

The community-based organizations (CBOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) I intended to study were primarily focused on long-term, economically beneficial and environmentally friendly development. However, with the onset of the pandemic, I could not help to study what I was seeing. I seemed like organizations that dealt in tourism were suddenly working to get their remote communities water, food and then-necessary sanitary supplies. Was this the case for other CBOs and NGOs that do not normally deal with public health or crisis management? How were organizations focused on sustainable development pivoting to help their communities face such sudden, short-term needs? Had they faced such a sudden, naturally-occurring crisis before? Did they pivot their initiatives then? How are they pivoting now?

I decided to broaden my focus beyond sole ecotourism and look at other regions in Latin America that rely in part on tourism; these areas, I thought, would be some of the most harshly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. I reached out to the non-profit Omprakash, an organization that partners with grassroots organizations around the world to provide trained volunteers and a fundraising platform. Omprakash had quickly responded to the pandemic by creating an online classroom where their partners could share their experiences during quarantine and provide insights into how their organizations can weather the storm.

Working with Omprakash, I selected 5 organization leaders that were active in this “Facing Pandemic” classroom and were based in Latin America. By luck, each organization was in a different country: Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Argentina. I then reached out to and interviewed the NGO representatives that participated in the classroom and asked how their respective organizations had pivoted (or not) to address new challenges in the communities they serve.

While I initially set out to compare how each organization adapted to naturally-occurring crises in the past with how they have adapted to the current pandemic, I realized that this would not be feasible. Some organizations had faced disasters such as droughts and earthquakes, but they were either mildly affected or impacted before current leadership had taken over. Others shared that their biggest challenges were not so much one-off crises as ongoing public health concerns and local stigmas. Given my inability to compare these variables across each organization, I found a different two dependent variables could be compared: how much their initiatives shifted with the beginning of the pandemic, and how well they were able to continue working without in-person volunteers. After providing a review of relevant literature and an outline of the organizations I interviewed, I will explain my analysis and findings.

CHAPTER ONE

HOW LOCAL NGOS SHOULD RESPOND TO CRISES

Introduction to the Literature Review

Although the pandemic is a public health crisis, much of the literature involving how CBOs and NGOs can help in crisis response revolves around natural disasters. I will include those frameworks here since they are relevant, and expand on the particular ways the NGOs in my study aided their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chapter 3. In general, community-based disaster response includes communication with community members, involving locals in the work that needs to be done, and collaborating with other NGOs and the local government to address resource needs as well as an awareness campaign.

Community-Based Organizations vs. Local Nongovernmental Organizations

When I first set out to study how organizations in Latin America were adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, I intended to focus on Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) given their grassroots connection to the communities they serve. CBOs are generally formed by individuals within the same geographically-defined area as their

beneficiaries¹ and serve as intermediaries between the community and other local, national and transnational organizations and entities in both the public and private sector.² CBOs can take many forms, including: networks of partners, business cooperatives, regional initiatives, neighborhood groups, farmers' and women's organizations.³ To achieve the community focus that is integral to a community-based organization, most of organization's staff and leadership should come from the community, and the physical headquarters should be based within the community itself.⁴

Some, but not all, of the organizations I interviewed fall under these criteria. If an organization was both founded and run by people not local to the community that the organization serves, I have not considered the organization to be community-based. One of the distinguishing features of a community-based organization is that it is based in the local culture and stems from the needs and wants of its community by actively encouraging their participation.^{5,6} If an organization is created and shaped by people external to the community, then it is difficult to consider whether the organization stems from local culture; rather, a better fitting term for an NGO that acts like a CBO, even

¹ Brian Dill, "Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Norms of Participation in Tanzania: Working against the Grain," *African Studies Review* 53, no. 2 (2010): 23–48.

² Rhonda Phillips and Robert Pittman, *An Introduction to Community Development* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

³ Phillips and Pittman.

⁴ Osaore A. Aideyan, "Community-Based Organizations," in *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, ed. Ali Farazmand (Normal, IL, USA: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 872–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20928-9_144.

⁵ Aideyan.

⁶ John W. Murphy, *Community-Based Interventions: Philosophy and Action* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2014).

though it does not fit all the conditions of a CBO, is a “local NGO.” For the purposes of my research, I will group all 5 of the organizations I studied as “local NGOs.” At least 3 of the organizations align with all the criteria of a CBO (founded by locals, run by locals, headquartered in the community it serves, and actively seeks community participation in its decision-making and functioning). Although 2 of the organizations were not founded by locals, they rely at least in some part on community participation and function almost the same as a CBO would in the communities they serve.

Responding to Disasters: The Shift from Community-Based Approaches to the Government and Back

Before diving into how communities reduce and manage risks that disasters pose, I would like to discuss what a community-based approach looks like; it is, after all, the first two words in the Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) process I will describe below. A Community-Based Approach (CBA) is “an umbrella term for approaches to programming which involve beneficiaries in their identification, design or management,” and include the “empowerment of people and communities, improving the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of interventions, building local organisational capacity, and strengthening local governance.”⁷ Although this understanding of CBAs has (to some extent) been picked up by international organizations in recent years, community-based approaches to disasters is not new. Prior to state formation and the

⁷ T Slaymaker and K Christiansen, “Community-Based Approaches and Service Delivery: Issues and Options in Difficult Environments and Partnerships,” *GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services*, 2005, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/community-based-approaches-and-service-delivery-issues-and-options-in-difficult-environments-and-partnerships/>.

subsequent “government responsibility” for disaster response, communities took care of their needs before and during a disaster, often through collective action.⁸

After most states in Latin America considered themselves responsible for disaster response and relief, the focus turned to exactly that: response and relief instead of preparation. (This is partially because of limited funds. If the treasury was limited, as it was in many states after independence, aid was only justified if it was sent to a place after disaster already struck.) However, there has been a shift in the last 50 years from reactive, emergency disaster management to preventive, risk reduction and planning.⁹ The “new” approach, much like before states assumed responsibility for disaster management, takes advantage of local resources and knowledge to reduce a community’s vulnerabilities in a disaster.¹⁰

Defining Risk and Disaster

Given the words “disaster” and “risk” are integral to the framework I discuss for how local NGOs are involved in disaster response and recovery, I should first outline those terms here. Disaster as defined by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction is “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and

⁸ Rajib Shaw, “Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*, by Rajib Shaw (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.47>.

⁹ Lorna P. Victoria, “Community-Based Disaster Management in the Philippines: Making a Difference in People’s Lives,” *Philippine Sociological Review* 51 (2003): 65–80.

¹⁰ Victoria.

environmental losses and impacts.”¹¹ Generally this includes what we think of as “natural disasters:” floods, earthquakes and wildfires, just to name a few. However, “disaster” as it is used in this framework also includes technical, biological and other health emergencies that may cause significant but not as serious disruption and damage to a society.¹² Disasters can be either large-scale, affecting most of a nation or nations, or small-scale – affecting only a few communities. Additionally, disasters can be slow-onset, such as drought and desertification, or sudden-onset, as in chemical explosions or critical infrastructure failure.¹³

Although the UNDRR lists epidemics under slow-onset disasters, I will classify the pandemic as a sudden-onset emergency. Given the abrupt nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent quarantine across much of Latin America, as well as its devastating effects on community health and functioning, it would be misleading and incorrect to call the pandemic a slow-onset emergency.

As for risk, the general term is likely already comprehensible to most. To be more precise, I define *disaster risk* in particular, as it is usually specified within the context of Community-Based Disaster Risk Management. Disaster risk is the “potential loss of life, injury, or destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time,” and is calculated by exposure to a hazard as well

¹¹ “Disaster,” accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster>.

¹² “The Important Distinction between Disaster and Risk | CAPRA | Probabilistic Risk Assessment Platform,” accessed April 27, 2021, <https://ecapra.org/documents/important-distinction-between-disaster-and-risk>.

¹³ “Disaster.”

as vulnerabilities and capacities in dealing with it.¹⁴ Disasters and hazardous events are thought to be the consequences of “continuously present conditions of risk,”¹⁵ namely exposure and vulnerability to disasters without much capacity to respond.¹⁶ Disaster risks, like most risks, can be reduced in order to lessen the damage to life and property that disasters cause.

Putting it all together: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management

Now, there are three stages of a disaster that communities can work in to minimize loss: risk reduction (before a disaster), response (during a disaster), and recovery (after a disaster). While scholars tend to focus on different phases and come up with names dedicated to each stage, one term broadly covers them all: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management. While international organizations and local NGOs use much of the same terminology to describe CBDRM, their use in practice can vary.¹⁷

For example, the United Nations (UN) first major framework for CBDRM was created with the goal of making disaster risk reduction “underpinned by a more proactive approach to informing, motivating and involving people in all aspects of disaster risk reduction in their own local communities.”¹⁸ The overall emphasis of this 2005

¹⁴ “Disaster Risk,” accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster-risk>.

¹⁵ “Disaster Risk.”

¹⁶ “Disaster Risk Reduction & Disaster Risk Management | PreventionWeb.Net,” accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.preventionweb.net/disaster-risk/concepts/drr-drm/>.

¹⁷ Annelies Heijmans, “The Social Life of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction: Origins, Politics and Framing, *Disaster Studies*,” January 1, 2009.

¹⁸ “Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters” (United Nations), accessed April 24, 2021,

Hyogo Framework was to create better communication of *top-down* ideas to manage disaster, rather than focus on how communities might help themselves and reduce their own vulnerabilities. The Sendai Framework a little over a decade later reflected a marginal shift toward incorporating community-based organizations and members, stating these parties can supply “specific knowledge” and “pragmatic guidance” in implementing disaster-management frameworks, as well as support public awareness and community resilience.¹⁹ Still, the overarching role of local NGOs would be to provide more cohesion with the national government and outside organizations while increasing compliance with foreign-developed disaster risk reduction plans within their communities.

Given the lack of agency really given to communities under international understandings of CBDRM, I will focus on a more appropriate version: homegrown CBDRM. While homegrown forms of CBDRM will vary from community to community (as they should), we can look at what many of these frameworks have in common and use this context to compare how local NGOs in Latin America are currently responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Homegrown CBDRM is about reducing the community’s vulnerabilities during disaster and increasing its capacity to handle and recover from the disruption a disaster brings. Unlike the international understanding of CBDRM, homegrown CBDRM is often “an approach to advance local level decision-making and partnering with local

<https://www.unisdr.org/2005/wcdr/intergover/official-doc/L-docs/Hyogo-framework-for-action-english.pdf>.

¹⁹ “Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 - 2030” (Sendai, Japan: United Nations, 2015).

government,” and, to some extent, “a strategy to transform power relations, and to challenge policies and ideologies responsible for generating vulnerability locally.”²⁰

While this approach to CBDRM may seem radical, it is essentially aiming to return decision-making to the people who are affected by a disaster – to the people that live in and know their community best. This form of CBDRM, which draws from the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and critical consciousness,²¹ aims to raise awareness within a community about the causes of their marginalization to understand the complex, interconnected environmental and social risks they face.²²

So, what does homegrown CBDRM look like for local NGOs? Homegrown CBDRM addresses vulnerabilities and their causes, such as poverty, social marginalization and environmental degradation in order to increase the capacities of communities to deal with disasters.²³ The goal of this form of CBDRM is not only to decrease a community’s vulnerabilities, but to create a sustainable, equitable form of development that adheres to the community’s characteristics and needs. The functions of local NGOs in homegrown CBDRM, then, are numerous: (1) reach out to and mobilize poor and remote communities; (2) help empower poor people to guide their lives; (3)

²⁰ Heijmans, “The Social Life of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction.”

²¹ Paulo Freire, Myra Bergman Ramos, and Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York, UNITED STATES: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=1745456>.

²² Robert Coates, “Educational Hazards? The Politics of Disaster Risk Education in Rio de Janeiro,” *Disasters*, August 9, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12399>.

²³ Dr Suvit Yodmani, “Disaster Risk Management and Vulnerability Reduction: Protecting the Poor,” 2000.

design projects at lower costs and more efficiently than government groups; and (4) encourage sustainable development.²⁴

To help illustrate how local NGOs might help in the crisis response stage of CBDRM, I have included examples from a recent study on CBOs' roles in the COVID-19 response in China.²⁵

Table 1 The Critical Roles of Community-Based Organizations in Zhejiang's Response to COVID-19	
Stage of COVID-19 Response	Key Roles of Community-Based Organizations
Stage 1: Comprehensive epidemic prevention and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing volunteers to trace the source and spread of COVID-19 • Collecting donations and supplies for epidemic control • Providing community services to help people staying at home receive basic life support
Stage 2: Balancing epidemic prevention and social functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing volunteers to trace the source and spread of COVID-19 • Providing welfare services • Assisting enterprises with production resumption
Stage 3: Normalization of epidemic prevention and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing volunteers to trace the source and spread of COVID-19 • Psychological counseling and social work • Building collaboration platforms to promote sustainable economic development

Figure 1: The Critical Roles of Community-Based Organizations in Zhejiang's Response to COVID-19

²⁴ Shaw, "Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction."

²⁵ Yuan (Daniel) Cheng et al., "Coproducting Responses to COVID-19 with Community-Based Organizations: Lessons from Zhejiang Province, China," *Public Administration Review* 80, no. 5 (2020): 866–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13244>.

CHAPTER TWO

ORGANIZATIONS OF STUDY

Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee – Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador

Mission and Activities

Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee (Tayu Jee) is two things at once: it is a Shuar community in Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador, and it is an ecotourism organization made up of the same group of people that live there. While the community was settled by Darling's grandfather in 1993, the organization was founded in 1995 and currently maintains about 8 staff members.²⁶ Through projects focused on their territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Tayu Jee works to both continue their Indigenous culture and practices while preserving the natural beauty and resources around them.

The ecotourism aspect of Tayu Jee includes excursions in the surrounding rainforest and the *Cueva de los Tayos*, or Tayos caves. Through guided tours, people from the community and part of the organization are able to share their ancestral knowledge and teachings about the value of the environment to our everyday lives.

²⁶ "Volunteer or Intern in Ecuador with Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee | Volunteer or Intern Abroad with Omprakash," accessed November 12, 2020, <https://www.omprakash.org/global/tayu-jee-ecuador>.

Tayu Jee's second focus is on farming for local consumption and some commercial sale. This work involves researching and establishing more sustainable farming practices, maintaining the quality of their soil, and evaluating what plants would be best exported and sold. Tayu Jee would not only share this knowledge and these skills with their adult community members, but teach their children aged 5-12 years old through community workshops.

Tayu Jee's third main focus before the pandemic was teaching English classes. This held the dual purpose of widening job opportunities for the children in their community and leading tours for their guests that do not speak Spanish.²⁷

Person Interviewed: Darling Kaniras

Darling Kaniras is the Assistant Volunteer Coordinator for Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee, but like many people who work in NGOs, he has many duties. Mr. Kaniras applies to grants, coordinates cultural workshops with other communities in Puyo Pastaza, and leads his own tours of the Tayos caves. He has been helping Tayu Jee since he was a child, and officially began working for them in his teens.²⁸

²⁷ "Volunteer or Intern in Ecuador with Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee | Volunteer or Intern Abroad with Omprakash."

²⁸ Darling Kaniras, How Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee Adapted to the Pandemic, interview by Emily Pugh, Zoom, February 24, 2021.

Iracambi – Minas Gerais, Rosário da Limeira, Brazil

Mission and Activities

Iracambi is an NGO based in Minas Gerais, Rosário da Limeira, Brazil, whose mission statement is “Saving Forests, Changing Lives.” Founded in 1999 with a staff of about 9 people, their primary focus is on sustainability: taking care of their surrounding rainforest and creating forest-based incomes for the rural inhabitants. The Iracambi Rainforest Research Center, one of the places where volunteers can do research, studies ecosystems and how to better maintain them.²⁹

The specific initiatives that Iracambi undertakes are numerous. The Forests4Water Program works to plant trees south of the Serra do Brigadeiro State Park in order to increase water capacity and form ecological corridors; Iracambi prepares, cares for, and eventually plants these trees. The Eco-Lieders (EcoLeaders) Program provides an environmental education through hands-on, playful workshops focused on respecting the environment and addressing long-term concerns like deforestation and climate change. Iracambi’s third most prominent initiative is the Living Pharmacy Program, which focuses on the research and development of native plants while keeping in mind the socio-economic empowerment of local rural communities. Through their work, Iracambi not only helps local farmers and inhabitants continue living off the land – they help combat climate change within Brazil.³⁰

²⁹ “Iracambi: Saving Forests and Changing Lives in the Brazilian Rainforest,” Iracambi, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://iracambi.com/>.

³⁰ “Volunteer or Intern in Brazil with Iracambi | Volunteer or Intern Abroad with Omprakash,” accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.omprakash.org/global/iracambi>.

Person Interviewed: Rogéria Castro

Rogéria Castro is the Volunteer Coordinator for Iracambi and has been with the organization since September of 2019. Rogéria has a Bachelor's degree in tourism and a Master's degree in Forest Sciences in two universities within Minas Gerais. She was a Park Ranger at the State Institute of the Environment, RJ, for 5 years before working in tourism more broadly. Additionally, she teaches Biology, Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics for Elementary and High School students.³¹

MySmallHelp Peru – Ollantaytambo, Peru

Mission and Activities

MySmallHelp Peru (MSH Peru) was founded in 2011 to support children and young adults with disabilities and/or little economic resources within Ollantaytambo, Peru. Their work, coordinated by only 3 staff members, in the Cusco area involves connecting children in need with basic education, health care and training to increase their job opportunities in the future.³²

Their main project, *Proyecto Milagro*, has helped find 16 children a godparent who can help with financing the child's education and provide extra support to the child's mother.³³ Additionally, MSH Peru helps disabled children at home with physiotherapy and communication exercises, as well as their homework and art lessons. In addition to

³¹ Rogéria Castro, "Rogéria Castro: Coordenadora de Voluntários e Visitação- Ong Iracambi," LinkedIn, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rog%C3%A9ria-castro-82153121/>.

³² "Volunteer or Intern in Peru with MySmallHelp Peru | Volunteer or Intern Abroad with Omprakash," accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.omprakash.org/global/mysmallhelp>.

³³ Jessica Sanchez, How MySmallHelp Peru Adapted to the Pandemic, interview by Emily Pugh, Zoom, March 4, 2021.

providing transportation to and from school for students with disabilities, MSH Peru helps complete their legal documentation to get access to public health, assists families with medical consultations, and raises funds to get children any medical equipment they need.³⁴

Person Interviewed: Jessica Sanchez

Jessica Sanchez has been involved with MSH Peru since 2012. From the capital of Peru, Jessica began volunteering in Ollantaytambo after gaining a specialization and then licentiate degree in Business Administration and Management from the University of Lima. In 2014 she became the Director and is now the President of the Board for MSH Peru. Primarily Jessica keeps in contact with key donors from Peru and abroad while managing strategic planning and fund distribution for the organization.³⁵

Voluntario Global – Buenos Aires, Argentina

Mission and Activities

Voluntario Global's primary function since 2006 has been to provide volunteers to their network of organizations and promote cultural exchange. Based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the 9 staff members of Voluntario Global recruit volunteers to work in orphanages, schools, community centers, community health centers, and soup kitchens.

³⁴ MySmallHelp Peru, "MySmallHelp Peru: Your Small Help Can Make A BIG Difference In A Child's Life," MiPequeñaAyuda - MySmallHelp Peru, 2021, <https://mysmallhelp.org.pe/>.

³⁵ Jessica Sanchez Vargas, "Jessica Sanchez Vargas: CEO & President of MiPequeñaAyuda - MySmallHelp Peru Non-Profit Organization," LinkedIn, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jessica-sanchez-vargas-a7591528/>.

One of the organization's initiatives, the Pacheco Community Center, teaches local children the science and historical importance of gardening and landscaping. Along with *Su Lavanderia*, a laundromat which trains young people in trade skills and cooperative values, Voluntario Global is able to focus on capacity-building for Argentina's younger generations.³⁶

Person Interviewed: Valeria Gracia

Valeria is one of the founders of Voluntario Global and is currently the Coordinator of Institutional Development. She graduated from Universidad del Salvador with a degree in tourism and languages and has worked on social organizational development and solidarity economy issues for more than 16 years. Now with Voluntario Global she helps create networks between local and international partners and connect community members with jobs.³⁷

Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. – Oaxaca, Mexico

Mission and Activities

Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. (SiKanda) was founded in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2009 to promote sustainable development and collaborative work within marginalized communities affected by poverty. With 19 full time staff and 4 part-time professionals,

³⁶ Voluntario Global, "Volunteer Opportunities in Argentina," Voluntario Global, accessed May 3, 2021, <http://voluntarioglobal.org/en/>.

³⁷ Valeria Gracia, "Valeria Gracia: Voluntario Global and Pacheco Community Founder," LinkedIn, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/valeria-gracia-03275714/>.

the crux of their work is with informal recyclers (*pepenadores*) and their families near dumpsites and landfills.³⁸ Working with the local government and other partners in Oaxaca, SiKanda ensures that the rights of informal recyclers are recognized while their professional skills are developed.³⁹ One of SiKanda's current projects, *Mujeres AVE*, also focuses on strengthening businesses and networks of women living around the largest dumpsite in Oaxaca through workshops and communal activities.⁴⁰

Person Interviewed: Bárbara Lazcano

Bárbara Lazcano is the Development Director of SiKanda. She received her degree in International Relations from the Universidad del Valle de México in Mexico City, and later specialized in Social Work with Youth at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Ms. Lazcano later gained a master's in Local Development from the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, where she saw the influence of racism and classism on a community firsthand. Since 2014, she has been designing projects and the organization's strategy while securing funds and representing SiKanda in forums and other events.⁴¹

³⁸ Bárbara Lazcano, How Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. Adapted to the Pandemic, interview by Emily Pugh, Zoom, February 26, 2021.

³⁹ "Inclusive, Dignified and Productive Recycling in Oaxaca – SIKANDA," SiKanda: Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C., accessed May 3, 2021, <https://sikanda.org/en/proyectos/inclusive-dignified-and-productive-recycling-in-oaxaca/>.

⁴⁰ SiKanda, "Mujeres A.V.E. / WAVE: Women in Entrepreneurship: Acting, Linking and Empowering," SiKanda: Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C., accessed May 3, 2021, <https://sikanda.org/en/proyectos/mujeres-a-v-e/>.

⁴¹ Bárbara Lazcano, "Bárbara Lazcano: Maestra En Desarrollo Local," LinkedIn, n.d., <https://www.linkedin.com/in/b%C3%A1rbara-lazcano-8a74a846/>.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW EACH ORGANIZATION ADAPTED TO THE PANDEMIC

Yamaram Jintia Tayu Jee

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community

In March of 2020, there was not much information within the community about COVID-19, let alone the pandemic. Some members who did not believe it was a new virus, but merely the *gripe común* (common flu), left to go shopping in the city. Through this contact with more urban populations and surrounding communities, it did not take long for the virus to spread through Tayu Jee.

However, community members were calm. They had a good knowledge of traditional medicine, and some elders like Darling's grandfather were experts in the field. When people showed symptoms of the virus in March, they were treated with local, traditional plants and no one in the community died from COVID-19.

Challenges posed by COVID-19

With the onset of the pandemic, people suddenly could not go into the city for much of their food supplies; the city was an hour and a half by bus and public

transportation was not running. Additionally, because of the quarantine and border closures around the world, the tourism sector that Tayu Jee relied on dried up. The quarantine orders in Ecuador meant that not only people around the country could not go on tours, but people from Europe (who make up most of Tayu Jee's business) could not come. From March to July of 2021, Tayu Jee did not receive any tourists from Ecuador or abroad; they had to rely on each other and their community garden, *Huerta Shuar*, to survive.

In terms of education, the community was lucky that their students were on vacation when quarantine started. Although about 6 children formally lived and studied in the community, Tayu Jee frequently welcomed kids from neighboring communities to come and collect fruit and take a few classes; this could no longer happen with the new quarantine. When school finally was back in session after a few weeks, it could not be held in person. The roughly 6 children had to take their classes online for the first time. When the family with 4 of those children had to suddenly move out of the community, the school could not afford to run with just the 2 children who were left and was temporarily closed.

How Tayu Jee Adapted

Although there was not any public transportation for many months, Darling's grandfather was able to afford a taxi about once a month to collect rice, sugar and other basic supplies for the community. Thankfully the community garden, one of Tayu Jee's main initiatives in continuing Shuar culture and knowledge, was able to provide the rest of the community's nutritional needs throughout the pandemic. Given they could not

receive tourists, the community together turned toward this garden and planted even more food like yuca, plantains and sweet potatoes to eat over the coming months.⁴² They also planted and harvested medicinal plants that help treat, in conjunction with western medicine, the symptoms of COVID-19.

Still, many people had left the community when the pandemic started. As Darling put it, the youngest members did not know how to live off of the environment and returned to their families in surrounding cities. (This transience is not surprising. Often when there were conflicts between community members in the past, people would find a new community to settle in; there is not a particular attachment to one set of land in Shuar culture, as people focus on their and their family's needs in times of crisis.) Those that did stay behind, about 8 people, kept a good attitude – that they were strong and could handle whatever comes their way.

Although Tayu Jee did not receive any volunteers even online in 2020, this did not have much of an affect. The tours are lead and run by community members, and volunteers would have only been able to help in perhaps expanding business opportunities for selling local crops and crafts. By July, Tayu Jee did receive 2 large groups of tourists that they were able to manage on their own given this self-reliance.⁴³

⁴² Darling Kaniras, *Huerta Shuar* (Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador, 2020).

⁴³ Darling Kaniras, *Tayu Jee and the Pandemic*.

Iracambi

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community

In early 2020, people in Minas Gerais began hearing rumors about an illness spreading through big cities around Brazil. Given their small size and rural setting, the community was not worried about whatever it was making it to their area. Still, information was widely available, and people knew that this virus was spread by foreigners visiting Brazil. Iracambi had a lot of foreign volunteers, especially *gringo*-looking Europeans, working on different projects at the time; this made community members nervous. Suddenly in March all the volunteers had to go home and leave whatever work they started behind them. After a nearby city was hit with COVID-19 pretty badly, more people in the community wore masks. Still, most people work outside in the open air, and not many community members contracted the virus for a while; thankfully when they did contract coronavirus, very few people died.

Challenges posed by COVID-19

As a national shutdown occurred within Brazil, Iracambi not only lost volunteers to help run their environmentally-focused programs – they lost volunteers whose program fees help pay for about 30% of the organization's budget. Funding an NGO is already difficult enough outside of a pandemic, especially when the national government, as Rogéria told me, is not sympathetic to NGOs nor environmental issues. Resources like technology and an office to work from are expensive and covering these costs as staff went remote proved challenging at first.

The lack of government support and resources were only amplified by the pandemic. Not only does the President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro have a track record of prioritizing big business over the environment – his administration continued ignoring scientific findings around how to handle the pandemic and support affected communities. Areas like Minas Gerais had to look to their local governments, which were not that much better; as Rogéria described it, most people that work in even the local municipal government are businessmen who do not support environmental efforts and the NGOs that run them. The city government is more supportive, but still does not have enough funds to provide tangible support to NGOs that need it in or outside of a pandemic.

How Iracambi Adapted

Although they could not work together in the office for many months, Iracambi's staff were able to shift to working from home during quarantine. Thanks to digital tools like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Drive, they were able to work together almost as well as they could in-person at the office. Iracambi took the enforced break from in-person work with volunteers to organize files and reports and really focus on their fundraising. Thankfully, according to Rogéria, the pandemic has made ordinary citizens pay more attention to environmental issues like forest restoration and potable water sources and, consequently, support Iracambi's fundraisers during the height of the pandemic. Iracambi used these funds to reboot their work in the field planting trees and to provide PPE to local volunteers.

Additionally, although Iracambi's *Ecolideres* (EcoLeaders) program could not meet in person, they were able to fully transition the course to an online format with the

help of a grant from Ford Motor Company, the “92Y Ford Fellowship Starling Fund.”⁴⁴

The full class on environmental issues was made free to teens anywhere in Brazil aged 16-18 years old. The material, same as when the EcoLeaders program is held in person, focused on climate change, forest soil, water, forest preservation, and how the teens could help their communities and make a difference in the environment right where they are. Through this online classroom, Iracambi was able to take some foreign online volunteers and continue work that aligns with their original mission to “Save Forests and Change Lives.”^{45,46}

MySmallHelp Peru

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community

People in the Cusco region largely rely on tourism to make a living. After the mandated quarantine in Peru and border closures, many families lost their primary or only source of income. This caused many families to return to planting crops such as potatoes and trading for products they needed with neighboring communities. While families returned to the field, many children were suddenly stuck at home. Classes for all students in Ollantaytambo were supposed to start in March after their scheduled vacation but were postponed to April.

⁴⁴ “Starling Fund,” 92Y Ford Fellowship, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.92yfordfellowship.com.br/starling-fund>.

⁴⁵ “Iracambi.”

⁴⁶ Rogéria Castro, How Iracambi Adapted to the Pandemic, interview by Emily Pugh, Zoom, February 25, 2021.

Given the news that foreigners were introducing coronavirus to new areas during their travels, people feared foreigners – especially Europeans. MySmallHelp Peru had to send letters to the local police to protect volunteers while they made plans to return to their home countries.

By April, everyone in Peru had to quarantine for 4 months. One of the staff, Jessica, was stuck in Lima because of the mandated quarantine and had to coordinate all her work remotely with the other 2 people on her team. Because Ollantaytambo only has one small public health center, local government decided to close the area off from visitors. Anyone who did end up affected by COVID-19 would have to travel many miles to receive medical attention from a hospital.

Challenges Posed by COVID-19

MySmallHelp Peru had plans to continue increasing the number of disabled and impoverished children they accepted into their main program, but with the new challenges of taking care of their current students, they simply could not accept more. The rural area they work in has limited access to internet, and for the roughly 230 students to be able to access their class materials, many schools started their classes via WhatsApp: a messaging app which takes up much less bandwidth than other communication platforms. However, not all of the students had this technology available to them, and none of the families in MSH Peru's network had printers nor enough school supplies for doing classwork at home.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ MySmallHelp Peru, "Update: Programs & Beneficiaries on 2020," MySmallHelp Peru, *MiPequeñaAyuda - MySmallHelp Peru* (blog), October 31, 2020, <https://mysmallhelp.org.pe/2020/10/31/programs-beneficiaries-updates-2020/>.

Because of quarantine guidelines, MSH Peru could not do their usual group activities until August of 2020. With the inability of volunteers to come to Ollantaytambo, and the lack of opportunity for in person activities, the organization struggled to maintain their funding since most of the organization's budget is paid for through volunteering fees. On top of this lack of financing, MSH Peru struggled to do all they needed to support the families in their network. Since the team that works for the organization is only 3 people, they rely heavily on volunteers to help with their projects.

Lastly, as Jessica shared with me, MSH Peru deals with the ongoing challenge of getting families to value education and fully accept their disabled children. Given the generations of farmers in most families, some parents are not literate and cannot help their children with homework. Others believe, according to old beliefs, that disabled children are a curse from God – that the parents are being punished for something. This marginalization has been internalized by many families in the area for generations, and MSH Peru continues to dismantle this idea in their work one-on-one with parents.

How MySmallHelp Peru Adapted

From April to June of 2020, any local volunteers they had did mostly administrative work as the online volunteer program slowly grew. In order to help children get the technology they needed to access their classes, MySmallHelp Peru made a campaign to get smartphones with internet access to those children that needed it. After getting authorization from the local government, MSH Peru delivered any printed materials that students needed along with school supplies for completing those assignments. The organization then used these visits to understand each family's situation

and needs, and MSH Peru was able to get the right resources (e.g., food and sanitation supplies) to each family.

After MSH Peru delivered phones and supplies to those that needed it, they helped children with their homework and academic planning via these phones. MSH Peru encouraged children to ask their teachers for help when they and their siblings needed it and conducted face-to-face visits (while complying with safety protocols) when explanations were too complex over the phone. MSH Peru and the 2 children's schools they partner with noticed that parents were becoming more involved in their children's education and provided more assistance with homework when they could.

Additionally, MSH Peru converted their English teaching project to online so students would not lose their progress. The English classes, like the classes at their school, were organized on WhatsApp. Through this format MSH Peru was able to open the English classes to a 3rd school catered toward adults and families, doubling the number of students they taught from 190 to over 430.^{48,49}

Voluntario Global

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community

On March 16th, Buenos Aires and the rest of Argentina came to a halt as everyone had to isolate themselves at home for the next 3 months. The government then began a public health campaign to prevent the spread of coronavirus. According to Valeria, two of the most important pieces of advice the government advocated were to “wash your

⁴⁸ MySmallHelp Peru.

⁴⁹ Jessica Sanchez, MSH Peru and the Pandemic.

hands” and “socially distance yourself from others.” However, many houses in the shantytowns that Voluntario Global serve do not have running water. On top of that, about 10 people from different families can live in a one-bedroom house, making social distancing from one another and staying at home very difficult. As many people in the shantytowns rely on informal work and live from paycheck-to-paycheck, families that were suddenly without work and without a savings to fall back on struggled. Many people found it difficult to get food, potable water, and other basic supplies for their families.

Challenges Posed by COVID-19

Under normal circumstances, Voluntario Global provides volunteers and other support to their network of partners in person; much of this work requires going to those organizations and into the shantytowns to deliver supplies. However, for many weeks Voluntario Global could not physically go to the neighborhoods to assist their constituents (e.g., to carry in food or help isolate those infected with COVID-19 from others). The government did not want to open services like food kitchens that would cause more people to come into contact with one another, and the emergency ruling to stay at home meant there was little that families could do. This meant that Voluntario Global’s partners, which work in everything from childcare to teaching job skills, also could not perform their duties.

The pandemic, according to Valeria, has revealed the deeper economic and health problems that exist in Argentina. Sadly, the pandemic has also worsened these problems of inequality. Everyone suddenly needed access to technology in order to receive an

education, and few people could afford to go to well-functioning private hospitals. It seems that the most vulnerable people in the city of Buenos Aires, the people that Voluntario Global help support, were those most affected by the new crisis.

How Voluntario Global Adapted

While Voluntario Global could not meet with families in person, they were able to ask people over WhatsApp what they were thinking and feeling during quarantine. Voluntario Global then shared about 2 stories a day on their social media. Since in-person volunteering was not possible, they decided to use their now online volunteers to create short informational videos on preventing the spread of coronavirus, which was then shared with organizations in their network that work with children. Those online volunteers who were qualified could also teach English in the now online English classes, and any donations from this program went to support the teachers in Buenos Aires. Voluntario Global created other fundraisers to support their partners, especially the soup kitchen, and continued meeting with organizations in their network over Zoom. Through these regular meetings, Voluntario Global maintained an awareness of what their partners were struggling with as well as how they could help.

In May, Voluntario Global got government approval to conduct a survey of one of the neighborhoods they serve, *Las Tunas*. The survey of 215 inhabitants over the age of 18 helped Voluntario Global understand the exact problems the neighborhood was facing, and consequently helped them raise awareness of these issues with the local government. After people expressed there was a scarcity of food and that it was difficult to quarantine in small spaces with many people, Voluntario Global was able to get the government to

reopen soup kitchens and rule that shanty towns could quarantine in small blocks of houses instead of single houses. After these soup kitchens were reopened, Voluntario Global helped gather and distribute food and cleaning supplies to families that could be taken home with them.

For the weeks they were not able to host people at the community garden in the Pacheco Community Center, Voluntario Global instead let families take home seeds and planting supplies. They then created a WhatsApp group chat to share information on how to sprout the seeds and for each person to share their experience. After a month, Voluntario Global staff collected the seedlings and planted them at the Community Center, showcasing the achievement of dozens of families in quarantine. By early 2021, Voluntario Global was able to reopen the Community Center and restart in-person activities for young teens and children in the area. While complying with public health regulations, students were able to work in the open air and take workshops on gardening, arts and crafts, and outdoor games.⁵⁰

Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C.

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community

Mexico closed stores and other businesses for a few months in early 2020, but the lockdown was not obligatory. Some of the municipalities in Oaxaca completely closed themselves off to visitors while others remained somewhat open. Thankfully, the

⁵⁰ Valeria Gracia, How Voluntario Global Adapted to the Pandemic, interview by Emily Pugh, Zoom, March 10, 2021.

municipalities that closed themselves off could rely on the food they grow and did not see much of the coronavirus in their communities, according to Bárbara.

However, the capital is a different story. People living in the city rely on tourism, where much of the work is informal. Many needed work after tourism basically shut down, and women were under particular stress. Women suddenly had to watch their kids all day, every day while continuing to work or trying to find new work to support their families; it was difficult to put food on the table for many families with children. Kids had to continue their education from home, but not every family had the technology and internet access to make it happen.

Challenges Posed by COVID-19

SiKanda suspended all of their activities with informal recyclers and each staff member had to start working from home. There was now pressure from donors to come up with new, detailed plans on how SiKanda would pivot during this crisis, even though there was not a lot of information that they could work with. Like Voluntario Global, some of their work just cannot be done without being in person, and no one knew when they could interact with program participants again. With all this uncertainty and increasing health concerns, SiKanda decided not to host international volunteers until at least early 2021.

Sadly, the pandemic only made the ongoing health and social crises worse. Oaxaca sees innumerable cases of common and preventable diseases each year, and healthcare is not always available. The public healthcare system is low staffed and underfunded, and those who want to seek treatment must arrive early in the morning just

to receive a pass to see a doctor. Even going to public health centers can be tricky, given that transportation costs over long distances can be prohibitive. Lastly, although I do not have much information to note, I should include that Oaxaca has seen a sharp increase in domestic violence since the pandemic started. This understandably concerns SiKanda, which largely works with women to increase their opportunities outside of the home.

How Solidaridad Internacional Kanda A.C. Adapted

Thankfully, many of SiKanda's staff members have already worked from home and were very familiar with online tools and programs for their meetings. When the pandemic started and quarantine measures were put in place, SiKanda decided to scale back the number of meetings they had for each project and converted them to an online format. The work within each project relies on SiKanda staff and very little on volunteers. So, with little worry about impeding project progress, SiKanda decided not to host any international volunteers in person until at least early 2021.

Although they could not hold any meetings in person for a few months, SiKanda was able to host their events and informational campaigns online. After assisting over 130 families with emergency food supplies, SiKanda used community group chats to disprove misinformation surrounding the coronavirus and keep up-to-date with the needs of different families. The project dealing with women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, *Mujeres AVE*, moved to a group chat on WhatsApp where SiKanda could share tutorials and encourage members to share their ideas. The approximately 46 women received business training once a week as well as monthly group meetings for communal activities and, if any women needed it, SiKanda was able to get them 2

months of internet and cell phone service for the program (this is in addition to the handful of cell phone cards they got for children to access their school materials). Given the acute stress many of the women were feeling with the pandemic, SiKanda brought on feminist psychologists in the 2nd month of the program to facilitate conversations on mental health.⁵¹

Overall Analysis

With only 5 organizations involved in my analysis, I cannot draw any (even remotely) conclusive decisions about how local NGOs across Latin America responded to the pandemic, nor whether their responses were good or bad. I did notice, however, that most of the organizations (Tayu Jee, Voluntario Global, SiKanda and MySmallHelp Peru) pivoted to meet the current needs of their program participants and people in the community they serve. Iracambi, as I discovered, is a very environmentally focused organization; while they included local farmers in some of their work, the focus is still on improving the environment where they are located. So, while Iracambi changed the format of their activities to online, they did not change the activities their organization is focused on. (I suspect this is because there are other NGOs in the area that specialize in disaster recovery or providing food and other supplies.)

Additionally, I noted that organizations focused at least in part on education (MySmallHelp Peru and Voluntario Global) and one organization that is not (SiKanda) helped get children internet access to do their classes from home. It appears that every

⁵¹ Bárbara Lazcano, SiKanda and the Pandemic.

country the organizations are based in (Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Argentina) mandated that children be taught remotely with the start of the pandemic. However, in at least 4 of the communities where the local NGOs of this study are located (Oaxaca, Mexico; Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Ollantaytambo, Peru), internet and technology access were a serious concern for their students.

Lastly, access to food, reliable work, and proper healthcare were not new issues for most of the communities in this study. While each organization focused on one or more of these problems in a different way before, the pandemic added another layer of complexity and emergency within each community. While each organization will likely return to their work focusing on the long-term betterment of their communities after the pandemic, most organizations shifted in significant ways to aid with their community's short-term hardships.

Conclusion and Further Research

There is currently not much literature on how local NGOs and CBOs not focused on disaster relief can aid in times of public health crises. Unfortunately, the deeper that I looked into how each organization is run and managed, I noticed that not all of the organizations in my study have a strong focus on the people in the community they serve. At the same time, sustainable development and reducing vulnerabilities in times of disaster may also include initiatives focused on the health of a community's environment. So, while Iracambi did not pivot to help their community members with any new issues they faced, they did continue to restore the local landscape and focus on their long-term mission.

I imagine that as the COVID-19 pandemic comes to a close, we will see much more research on how individual communities and organizations responded to the pandemic. While there is a big emphasis in Community-Based Disaster Risk Management on sustainable development, which these organizations all work on in some way, there should be a bigger focus on how local NGOs also pivot outside of their normal initiatives to provide other types of short-term assistance. While the NGOs in my study did not necessarily mobilize the poor in their community during the pandemic, much of their work beforehand did. Additionally, some organizations (like SiKanda and MySmallHelp Peru) were able to continue capacity-building initiatives through new, online formats to empower locals to guide their own lives. While it is unknown whether their activities were done through lower costs than their governments would have spent, these organizations were filling in gaps in their country's COVID-19 response at the local level. If I have learned anything through this research, it is that these NGOs are remarkably adaptive and full of concern for the communities they serve.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBA: Community-Based Approach

CBDRM: Community-Based Disaster Risk Management

CBDRR: Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction

CBO: Community-Based Organization

NGO: Nongovernmental Organization

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