

WOMEN REBUILDING THEIR COMMUNITIES: EVALUATION & LEARNINGS

HOW TO BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES?

Summary¹



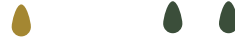
CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION.....	01
01 THE RESEARCH.....	02
02 THREE REASONS TO FOCUS ON WOMEN.....	03
2.1 Women's and girls' vulnerabilities in disasters are different from those of men.....	03
2.2 Women's and girls' specific needs in post-disaster settings and reconstruction go ignored.....	04
2.3 Women's contributions in reconstruction are not recognized or valued and therefore remain hidden, perpetuating the circle of patriarchy.....	05
03 KEY FINDINGS AND ACHIEVEMENTS.....	06
04 WOMEN REBUILDING THEIR COMMUNITIES.....	13
05 RESILIENT COMMUNITIES: MAKING THE CASE FOR A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR FONDO SEMILLAS.....	16
5.1 Our disaster framework.....	17
5.2 Key implications: resilient communities.....	18
06 RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM WRC TO RESILIENT COMMUNITIES.....	21
07 CONCLUSION.....	22



INTRODUCTION



On September 7 and 19, 2017, Mexico was hit by two earthquakes with magnitudes of 8.2 and 7.1. The states of **Chiapas, Mexico City, Estado de México, Guerrero, Morelos, Puebla and Oaxaca** were affected. While the government's response focused mainly on Mexico City, other regions had less access to funds for recovery, which amplified their already precarious position.

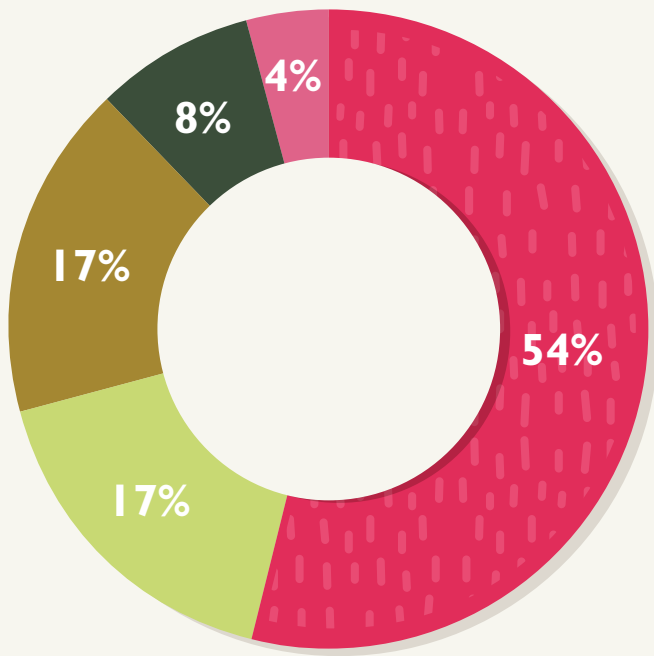
In 2018, Fondo Semillas launched a formal fundraising campaign under the initiative **Women Rebuilding their Communities** (WRC, 'Mujeres reconstruyendo sus comunidades' in Spanish), considering that:

- 01** Several donors reached out to Fondo Semillas to support a response to the disaster. Progressively, a bigger grant pool emerged.
- 02** The national government would not be able to tackle the emergency alone, and the response mechanisms in place lacked transparency.
- 03** In the post-earthquake stage, many people got together to help, and some started to join forces forming women's groups. Fondo Semillas aimed to support these new groups and, thus, strengthen civil society.
- 04** The entirety of the nonprofit sector was spurred into action (not just disaster specialist organizations), trying to find their own way to support recovery.
- 05** Community groups, especially those led by women, were not being funded, even though they are the ones that would be staying in the community after the external help left. Besides, priority was given to short-term housing reconstruction projects, leaving aside other key recovery needs such as economic revival, strengthening of social fabric within communities, and mental health.

The goal was to provide long-lasting, sustainable accompaniment to the affected communities by supporting **women-led reconstruction projects**. The objective of the WRC was to **strengthen women's organizations' capacities** (women's rights, strategic skills and knowledge around reconstruction, recovery and organizational capacity) and to **reduce vulnerability to potential future disasters** by fostering alliances among organizations and other key actors as well.

After mapping and assessing the needs on the ground, the Fund began by consolidating its own alliances with Ambulante, Oxfam Mexico and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), among others, and then issued a call for proposals: 24 grantee-partners were selected, reflecting the hardest hit areas, and also the ones affected from underlying pre-existing vulnerabilities.

¹ The entire document is available at: https://semillas.org.mx/pdf/WRC_evaluation.pdf



● Oaxaca ● Morelos ● Puebla ● CDMX ● Guerrero

Noticeably, **groups without prior experience as an organization that had existed for less than a year** were encouraged to apply, since many women's groups were formed as a result of the earthquakes.

The WRC support started in July 2018, and lasted until December 2019. A one-year extension was enabled for 15 organizations, thanks to the continuous fundraising during the WRC implementation. As of March 31, 2019, WRC's total budget was of 17,382,444 MXN (approximately 880-900,000 USD), and was distributed as follows:

Grants	Program implementation	Team salaries	Overhead
62%	18%	17%	3%

01 THE RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

This evaluation was carried out by Eva Didier
—an external evaluator who already knew Fondo Semillas' methodology— with two objectives:

- 01 Evaluate the Reconstruction project (WRC)** in order to learn whether the implemented strategies and accompaniment met the WRC objectives effectively.
- 02 Explore the potential for replication of the WRC initiative within Fondo Semillas in the longer term** to establish whether a 'reconstruction' initiative should and could be retained by the Fund in the longer term. Analyze whether it strategically aligned with Fondo Semillas' vision, which capacities would be needed and how to implement lessons learnt from the WRC evaluation.

The methodologies used were:

1. For objective one, we adopted a small-scale longitudinal approach, which also included a review of WRC documents, several interviews with teams and organizations, local authorities and a sample of grantee-partners.

2. For objective two, abductive reasoning was used, which allows contextualizing the empirical data to answer the questions about where to invest resources and actions, now and over the coming years, and which priorities to consider in the future.

THREE REASONS TO FOCUS ON WOMEN

2.1 WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' VULNERABILITIES IN DISASTERS ARE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF MEN

This is due to pre-existing structural inequalities, especially among the lower socio-economic classes. The traditional gender roles women and girls occupy in society lead to a lack of 'assets' that they can rely on in an emergency. For example:



Not all women and girls have the opportunity—or are allowed—to learn skills (e.g., swimming or climbing) that may be crucial for survival during natural hazards.



Patriarchal norms police women's clothing; thus, women's clothes impede their ability to move quickly and easily when fleeing from danger.



Women and girls are the main caregivers for relatives at home (e.g., children and older adults), which means they tend to be responsible for the safety and care of others.

2.2

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' SPECIFIC NEEDS IN POST-DISASTER SETTINGS AND RECONSTRUCTION GO IGNORED:

CAREGIVERS FOR ALL:

In the aftermath of a disaster, it generally falls upon women to look after the sick, injured, children, elderly, among others, in addition to carrying out their usual domestic chores. This responsibility creates a greater burden on their time and health.

ECONOMIC TENSIONS:

If the main breadwinner (often the male head of household) dies or is forced to migrate, women need to seek paid employment in a context where opportunities scarce, creating fertile ground for labor exploitation. Moreover, women still have to take care of the household, and a domino effect is sometimes observed. Girls are pulled out of school to take care of the household while their mother pursues paid work outside of the house.



LAND OWNERSHIP LAWS:

Due to tenure laws in many countries, it is common for women not to have the legal right to own property, and/or do not have land ownership documentation in their names. This means they are less likely to inherit land in case the male head of household dies. This point was particularly crucial in the aftermath of the 2017 earthquakes in Mexico, as support was provided only to those who could demonstrate land ownership.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS FINANCIAL AID COMPENSATION:

Due to a lack of viable identity documentation, it is extremely difficult for women to access cash handouts that are sometimes distributed by government authorities as compensation.

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH AS AGGRAVATING FACTORS OF VULNERABILITIES:

In the context of post-disaster settings, women generally do not receive the health and obstetric care they need and may live in unsanitary conditions, putting them at greater risk during pregnancy and childbirth.

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:

It is increasingly recognized that little attention is paid to the risks and realities of gender-based violence in post-disaster settings (looking at refugee camps during armed conflicts, for example), and to the considerable delay in women reporting this violence (when they do) due to a lack of access to essential services and support structures. Some WRC grantee-partner organizations witnessed this form of violence when assisting women who felt unsafe or at risk in mixed-gender shelters. Additionally, when families who had lost housing after the earthquakes moved in with relatives, the proximity and overcrowded quarters often resulted in an increased risk of sexual violence.

2.3

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS IN RECONSTRUCTION ARE NOT RECOGNIZED OR VALUED AND THEREFORE REMAIN HIDDEN, PERPETUATING THE CIRCLE OF PATRIARCHY

EXCLUSION FROM PLANNING, DESIGNING AND REPAIR PROCESSES (including in spaces considered as 'women's spheres'): despite women's central role in the home, their opinions and needs are largely ignored when it comes to reconstruction. This is supported by empirical evidence from the WRC grantee-partners, as many reported how the authorities responsible for assessing damages sometimes ignored those caused to kitchens or ovens.

LACK OF INVOLVEMENT prevents women from identifying disaster risk factors for themselves. This perpetuates the absence of adequate preparedness in case of replicas or other natural hazards.

INVISIBLE AND HIDDEN IN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENTAL DATASETS: The lack of official statistics broken down by sex or gender in many countries essentially erases the specific, unique aspects of women's situations and makes it much harder to take sex or gender into consideration when conducting research, or to learn about how disasters affect women differently and which solutions can have more impact.

WOMEN'S ORGANIZING IS STILL NOT FIRMLY ESTABLISHED: In some places, it is still often uncommon for women to have the autonomy to step out of their homes and gather, which impairs collective organizing—a critical skill in the context of reconstruction.

The sum of these factors results in an aggravation of structural pre-existent inequalities endangering women in many ways, since it perpetuates patriarchal oppression. The fundamental purpose of WRC is to establish an equal way in rebuilding, empowering women and supporting their leadership.

KEY CONCEPTS IN THIS STUDY:

1 COMMUNITY:
In the context of this study, 'community' refers to the social and geographical unit of women who participated in the activities and workshops, and their relatives and neighbors.

2 RESILIENCE:
It is not defined as the removal of all vulnerabilities, but as the capacity of communities to integrate these factors into their lives in the most positive way and to be better prepared in the face of shocks and stresses.

3 RISK CULTURE:
The attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of a given population in a situation of risk, included in a specific set of patterns and characteristics.

4 FEMINISMS:
Rejecting the idea of reuniting 'all women's experiences' into a single universal narrative, 'feminisms' reflect the plurality and intersectionality of women's identities as women. Even though some of women's groups do not consider themselves as feminists, they do challenge the *status quo* by empowering women in their communities.

KEY FINDINGS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Initially, it is important to consider what communities we are talking about and how the differences or nuances between them affect the program's achievements.

Amidst WRC groups there is a **disparity in terms of activism** (including feminist activism). Most of the groups supported by Fondo Semillas are constituted by feminist activists (e.g., sexual and reproductive health rights) or defenders whose activism overlaps with feminist causes (e.g., environmental rights feminism or 'feminismo comunitario territorial'), whereas the WRC groups have different backgrounds and compositions. To some extent, this reflects the key decision Fondo Semillas took to open up the selection process to new groups, which were formed immediately after the earthquakes.

Also, WRC grantee-partners relate to women's rights in different ways, and some feel not-so-comfortable describing their projects as 'feminist': for instance, groups under **Economic Reactivation** (rebuilding ovens, masonry skills, furniture making) focused on their right to work and to generate an income, and did not necessarily associate themselves to feminism. They shared some similarities with economic cooperatives, which tend to play a key role in movement building and have the potential to achieve changes that contribute to greater gender equality and respect for women's rights in their communities.

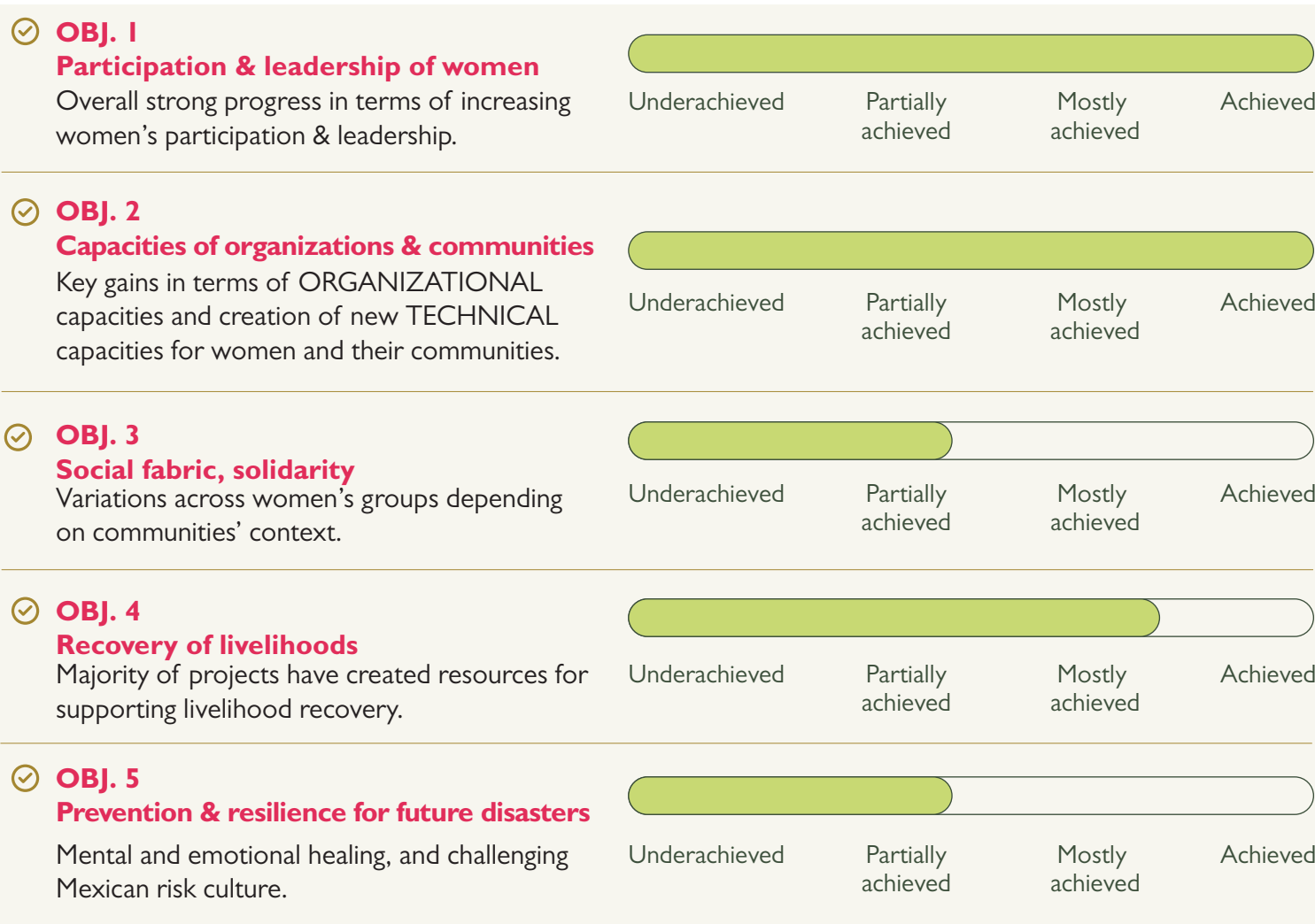
On the other hand, women's groups operating **Community Development** projects emphasized that women should lead collective processes, with a more direct understanding of the importance of women's participation outside the domestic sphere. This point of view is also shared by women's groups that worked under the **Mental Health Recovery** effort, which strongly focused on breaking women's isolation and silence, and fighting post-traumatic stress disorder through collective empathy.

THESE FINDINGS OPPOSE THE WIDESPREAD TENDENCY TO HOMOGENIZE WOMEN INTO A SOLE CATEGORY, UNLIKELY SHARING THE SAME CHARACTERISTICS, CONTEXT, NEEDS, AND THUS FAILING TO ACKNOWLEDGE DISTINCTIVE FACTORS SUCH AS CLASS, AGE, ETHNICITY, REGION AND EDUCATION.

Consequently, community rebuilding had a different meaning depending on the context: Some groups (mainly in the Oaxacan Isthmus region) already had a long-standing community-making practice embedded in their traditions, which helped implementing or reactivating the community-building efforts in the region.

However, the experience was entirely different in Mexico City, where the sheer individualistic and competitive demeanor often inhibits a community angle. Nevertheless, many of the city-based women’s groups carried out projects aimed at fostering a sense of interdependency with neighbors. In doing so, they relied on **stimulating bridging networks** (e.g., neighbors, friends in the vicinity), aiming to create long-term solidarity, also taking into consideration that family bonds –which tend to be longer lasting– could be out of reach in the context of big cities.

The 24 women’s groups supported by the WRC reached approximately 9,214 people in total, including direct participants and indirect beneficiaries. Overall, the majority of the women’s groups supported by the WRC displayed strong progress over the 18-month grant span, especially regarding the direct involvement and participation of women in the various recovery processes implemented.



Also, these projects birthed five areas of learning, as follows:

a) Repositioning women’s roles: from informal and invisible to open participation.
Some of the recovery projects propelled by WRC could be defined as putting women officially in charge as experts and decision-makers, which boosted their self-esteem, but it also inscribed value on their work and expertise for the rest of their communities, recognizing the importance of tasks and knowledge that were previously invisible. This –and other experiences– calls for the dismissal of the misconception about ‘women as victims,’ who cannot lead reconstruction processes.

CLOSE-UP ON MUJERES LUCHANDO POR LA AUTONOMÍA (OAXACA)

[After the earthquake] schools were damaged, so there was a meeting of parents to appoint a committee [to supervise the schools rebuilding], composed only of men. But during the meeting they found out that one of the attending women had reconstruction experience through our project, already participating in a reconstruction workshop on risk prevention. The community recognized her role and therefore integrated her into the school reconstruction committee.

Also, the organizations involved in activities traditionally reserved for women (e.g., projects around recovering the means for women to bake *totopos*) tended to meet less resistance within the communities, since these activities did not question or disrupt the *status quo* around women's assigned roles in the community. Conversely, groups that involved women in activities traditionally reserved for men (e.g. masonry) or in the decision-making process, were initially met with more reserve or criticism, although this tended to shift to a more positive acceptance as women persisted.

“Generally, it is said that construction is a man's thing, but many decisions fell into women's hands, because men finally realized that those who make use of that space and those who know what that space is for are the women themselves.” (WRC grantee-partner)

In most communities, the initial resistance progressively evolved to neutrality and, sometimes, even to interest.

CLOSE-UP ON UNIÓN DE PUEBLOS DE MORELOS

One day, a man from the community joined at the end of one of our workshops. We were planning for an excursion to Guerrero to sell some products, and some women began to take an interest and raised their hands. But then the man said: 'You are already signing up, yet you have not asked your husbands for permission.' So a woman replied, 'If in some way what I do is going to benefit my family and my community, why would my husband not let me go?' This made us witness a reconfiguration of the gender roles. The interesting thing is that when she responded to that man, we [women from the organization] were not the ones who had to give an explanation, the women were the ones who replied to him directly.

It is important to notice that, in some cases, possibly a women's group contributes to increasing women's leadership while generating high opposition from within the community or, in different cases, a group could get ample in-community support, but without advancing women's leadership. This points to a fact: community support does not automatically correlate, nor equate, to an increase in women's leadership.

b) Developing new capacities and solidarities together

Through the WRC-sponsored projects, women acquired organizational capacities and ‘thematic’ abilities (related to ‘hard’ skills, such as masonry, and ‘soft’ skills, such as emotional healing).

In terms of organizational capacities, women acquired new skills after the earthquakes: they demonstrated a greater ability to systematically manage, plan and organize as a group, overcoming previous difficulties to obtain internal collaboration.

This is particularly important, taking into consideration that 42% of the WRC’s set of grantee-partners did not exist pre-earthquake, nor had prior experience working as a collective, and certainly not in activism. A particularly significant example of capacity building was self-care and emotional healing.

“As we stated from the beginning, the most difficult thing was not only the physical or architectural reconstruction but the emotional one —the recovery of security and a mood of confidence.” (WRC grantee-partner)

Finally, the importance of setting up, enabling and shaping women-only spaces should not be underestimated.



CLOSE-UP ON ASOCIACIÓN ESTATAL DE MUJERES INDÍGENAS Y CAMPESINAS XASASTI YOLISTLI

Before, these women were alone, abandoned. They were affected by the earthquakes, but they had been also damaged by violence and infidelity... Many issues affected them in extreme ways. So, they refer to a ‘before’ and an ‘after.’ Today they defend this space created by them as women; this space is where they meet, learn, have fun, chat, talk about their problems —so it is actually something that has nurtured us exponentially as an organization.

WRC's initiatives resulted in **77 capacity-building workshops, with an average of three per grantee-partner.** Fondo Semillas' accompaniment model is aimed at providing not only financial resources in the form of grants, but also equipping grantees with the critical skills they would need to thrive and self-sustain as a group: overall, **major results were achieved in Risk Management and Institutional Strengthening.**

GROUPS OF WOMEN COMING TOGETHER WITH THE CONFIDENCE TO SELF-ORGANIZE AND ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES THEY SET FOR THEMSELVES ARE A FUNDAMENTAL AND ESSENTIAL STEP TOWARDS MOVEMENT BUILDING. THIS FINDING IS CRUCIAL AND CANNOT BE UNDERESTIMATED. EXTERNAL PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS MUST UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS CONSTITUTIVE TO ACTIVIST ORGANIZING: TO SOLVE COMPLEX SOCIAL ISSUES, THE SOLUTION OFTEN HAS TO ENVELOP A SUPERIOR DEGREE OF COMPLEXITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE ACROSS ACTORS.

c) The challenges of strengthening the social fabric of communities

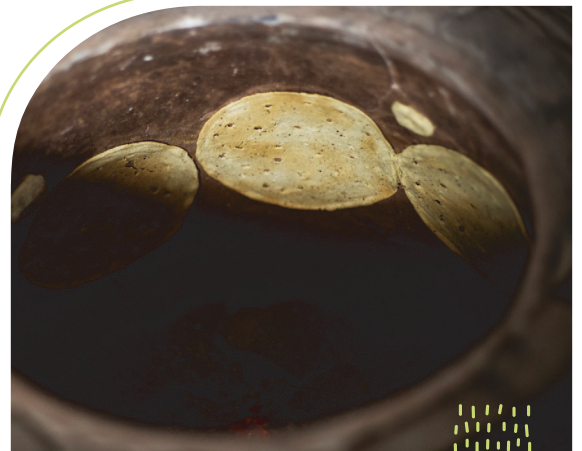
Decades of the state's paternalistic approach to aid, which fosters a culture of passivity, makes it much harder to bring people together to take matters into their own hands, without relying on external assistance to 'fix' problems. Thus, some groups faced resistance towards collective processes because some women were thought to have benefited more abundantly from state assistance –or even from the WRC project itself– than others in the community, resulting in a sort of **rise of individualism.**

Another challenge was the lack of time, which prevented the **sustained participation of women over time.** After the natural disasters, an extra workload was added to women's usual household responsibilities and work. So, groups were often not sure of how many attendees would show up for workshops or activities. Furthermore, women got demotivated if they did not get immediate results or faced criticisms and mockery.

These considerations expose the **need to challenge activities and strategies of engagement with women in communities.** For instance, several women's groups became aware that workshops as a default methodology may not be the most suited for women lacking a history of activism or organized collective association. Thereafter, they sought for alternatives, such as carrying out the activities as cultural days during local celebrations –when women have some free time. Other groups promoted 'artivism'– cabaret and humor usage to start conversations about women's rights, taught by Las Reinas Chulas.

d) Beyond housing: recovery of livelihood and economic autonomy

A key gain of the WRC program was that in the majority of groups, **women developed radically new skills** and learned new techniques, such as bioconstruction of housing and *totopos* ovens. This could reveal itself in the long-term as a potential asset in income-generating activities, therefore helping women to become self-sufficient. In this sense, WRC implemented some recommendations issued by other organizations such as the one stated by Global Fund for Women: "Help women become self-sufficient. Relief efforts must include long-term income-generating projects and/or jobs for women whose livelihoods and/or key providers have been lost, so they may provide for themselves and their families."





**“Making the stove allowed them to exchange knowledge; solidarity aroused throughout the construction, because none of them built the oven alone.”
(WRC grantee-partner)**

CLOSE-UP ON EL SUEÑO DE HUEJOTENGO (MORELOS)


Through this project, we managed to involve women directly in the reconstruction process. We want to make sure that reconstruction does not depend upon the resources the government could give. Instead, we seek to guarantee that livelihoods for the community are being rebuilt too, and that the social, family fabric within our community is strengthened. This way, in the future, we can have the community development that we haven’t had before, since this is a marginalized area. We always keep in mind that we want to be the main protagonists in pursuing the stability we need.

In the matter of capacity building, WRC clearly aligns with Fondo Semillas’ Theory of Change, since it enables women to develop their autonomy at a **personal level** (learning and honing new skills, boosting self-esteem), at a **community level** (transmitting and sharing the knowledge with others, and using it to rebuild and strengthen the community), and at a **professional level** (acquiring new skills which could potentially generate income). Moreover, WRC takes into account the importance of a **collective gain**, thus, **economic stability becomes a basis to build social stability and a sense of solidarity between women. This is especially important in the communities where women are the main or sole breadwinners**, especially in vulnerable rural environments.

On the other hand, experience shows also a need to ensure the cultural uptake of innovation: for instance, solar ovens are completely alien to the communities, making acceptance difficult. In other words, in material reconstruction there is both a need to restore tradition and to introduce new, safer ways (to make it ‘disaster-proof’). Many of the women’s groups improvised and found ways that worked in their context. For example, one of the groups produced an illustrated manual to chart the step-by-step progress of kitchen construction and give reassurance to people involved that they were on the right track.



RECOVERY BEYOND HOUSING HAS BEEN A KEY ACHIEVEMENT OF THE WRC AND ITS GRANTEE-PARTNERS. NOURISHING THE POTENTIAL FOR AUTONOMY IS ESSENTIAL: EXTERNAL SUPPORT THROUGH NGOS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT SOMETIMES LEADS HOUSEHOLDS TO BECOME RELIEF-DEPENDENT. ON THE CONTRARY, **A BETTER INCOME SUPPORT** (I.E., ASSISTANCE WITH EMPLOYMENT) **WOULD MAKE A SUBSTANTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO RECOVERY.**




e) Prevention and preparedness for future disasters: towards a shift in risk awareness

In risk preparedness, achievements seemed less apparent as this research identified a lack of risk-prevention measures implemented. Although they were able to identify potential vulnerabilities, most groups felt there was a lack of concrete measures in the eventuality of a new disaster. Communities on the ground that were the most likely to be directly affected seemed to be the hardest to engage in disaster preparedness. A hypothesis here is that living in a disaster-prone area is not necessarily correlated to increased risk perception, and this could also be attributed to a psychological coping mechanism for populations in order to manage uncertainty. An explanation could be the **distrust of authorities, linked to fatalistic attitudes, which hampers disaster preparedness.**

Especially in Mexico, this adds to suspicion of corruption and mishandling of aid. Another potential explanation lies in the perception of what 'being ready' in the face of a disaster means. Many grantee-partners knew, to some degree, what practical immediate steps to take in the event of another earthquake. **This knowledge is not equated with readiness because the earthquake occurrence itself cannot be controlled or anticipated.**


The full extent of activities and strategies implemented by the women's groups shows the degree to which these groups are building resilience for their community overall, not just through disaster preparedness training. **An important role is played by bridging networks, as well as the arrangement of women-only spaces,** which has proven to be successful, offering an opportunity for women to look beyond themselves and allowing them to gather with other women in similar conditions.



CONSEQUENTLY, **PRIORITIZING WOMEN'S SPACES IS A PRACTICAL STEP THAT CANNOT BE SKIPPED IN RECONSTRUCTION AND RESILIENCE,** SINCE THEY ARE THE MEDIUM THROUGH WHICH WOMEN REVISE, REINVENT AND CREATE NEW WAYS TO COLLABORATE, WORK AND HEAL TOGETHER.



In addition, taking charge of reconstruction processes unveiled to women **a new perspective on their identity: workers, fighters, survivors.**



WOMEN REBUILDING THEIR COMMUNITIES

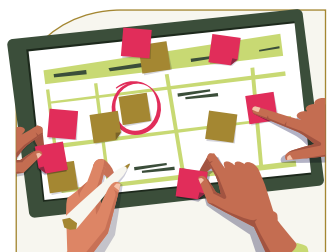
Regarding the objectives the WRC set for itself, the results are the following:



a) WRC contribution to the field of reconstruction: perspectives from allies

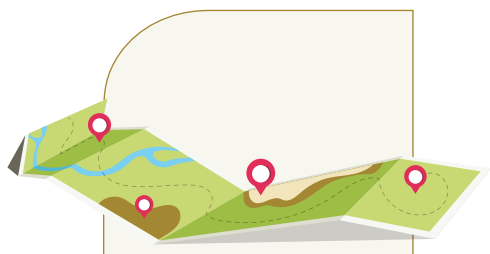
The contribution of WRC to the reconstruction in Mexico was **perceived as highly valuable across the board of allies and disaster specialists**: organizations in the field, donors and feminist and community allies highlighted that WRC brought **women's voices, abilities and needs to the forefront**.

Three specific dimensions of WRC and its approach were especially appreciated:



Taking a longer-term view of recovery: waiting several months before starting to give grants allowed WRC to support midterm projects, while leaving room for women's groups on the ground to refine their vision and strategies.

Shifting power to grassroots organizations, by focusing on marginalized, underserved communities within the accompaniment model that seeks to build up alliances across women's groups and promote capacity building.



Expanding the geographical scope in order to achieve greater coverage and reach organizations with whom Fondo Semillas hadn't previously worked.

“Fondo Semillas is uniquely equipped to connect with the organizations, whereas an international funder perhaps could not, which is another kind of its key strengths.” (WRC donor)



In addition, some opportunities emerged:

- 01 **Feedback and collaboration follow-up**, which implies helping curate the training provided to the individual needs of grantee-partners and systematizing the reports to provide additional insight for a closer follow-up.
- 02 **Allies as thinking partners**: Getting their input about the learning could help refine the strategy of the WRC.

Meanwhile, donors –strongly relying on Fondo Semillas– also underscored WRC’s ability to **open up an early dialogue with key ‘disaster actors’ in Mexico**. Furthermore, **transparency around the selection** process was important.

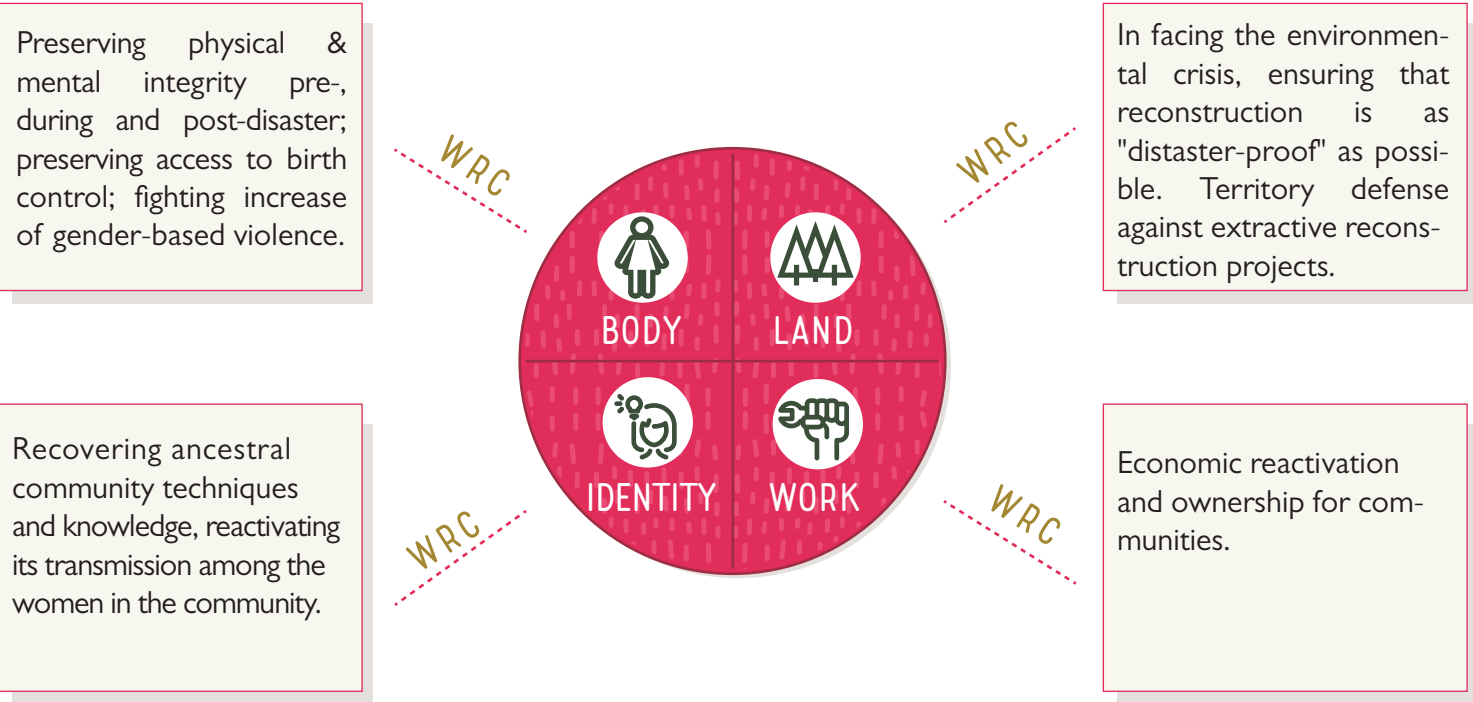
“

WE DECIDED TO CONTRIBUTE TO FONDO SEMILLAS BECAUSE WE KNEW THAT THE RESOURCE WAS GOING TO BE BETTER USED, WHERE IT WAS REALLY NEEDED AND WHERE IT COULD FILL IN THE GAPS.

(WRC donor)”

Donors –especially those rooted within ‘disaster philanthropy’– saw a core alignment between reconstruction as an area and the four programs of Fondo Semillas’ architecture:

Fondo Semillas **four** programs



b) The accompaniment model (strengths, challenges and learning): perspectives from the WRC team

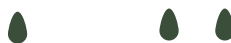
WRC's accompaniment model entails **financial support through a grant, capacity-building training**, and an **alliance-building strategy**, facilitated by Fondo Semillas through the organization of meetings and also with financial help to support grantee-partners to organize mini-regional meetings or travel to meet their partners. **New alliances** also emerged across the grantee-partners of the WRC in **75%** of the cases, giving **a total of 36 new alliances**, with an average of two per grantee-partner.

Women's groups with the most successful track record –with mission and objectives clearly established from the start– **adapted their strategy as they continued to work**. The organizations realized that there might be more efficient ways to work and engage their beneficiaries, in order to reach the initial goals. This bolsters the importance of a **high degree of personalization and a greatly flexible model from the funder's perspective**, since Fondo Semillas allows grantee-partners to revise and modify their strategy or activities to more effective ways as they go along.



05

RESILIENT COMMUNITIES: MAKING THE CASE FOR A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR FONDO SEMILLAS



Interviews with the internal WRC and Fondo Semillas teams revealed excitement and a clear sense of opportunity when thinking about transforming the WRC fund into a permanent, fully integrated program area within Fondo Semillas. Interviews with donors and allies also confirmed the potential for long-term replication.

Regarding the donors, their understanding of what reconstruction *is*, and *how it works* differs:

- **Non-disaster donors** see reconstruction as **primarily material rebuilding**. They also tend to see it as **fixed in time**, since they frequently are not familiar with the rationale of having a gender or feminist lens to reconstruction. Consequently, Fondo Semillas needs to make the case of why reconstruction led by women and for women is essential.
- **Disaster specialist donors**, on the contrary, consider reconstruction as **both material and social**. They understand that the response time frame is long and complex, and operates both on **the short term and the longer term**. Although they focus on community-led, participatory and localized recovery processes, there is a **current lack of dedicated focus on women and their needs**.

In a nutshell, there are **three core misconceptions to debunk**:

- 1. Reconstruction is short-term/limited in time.** Fondo Semillas needs to establish its conceptual understanding of disasters, and what solutions are called for.
- 2. Reconstruction is a specialist humanitarian aid area requiring specific technical capacities.** It is essential to situate what Fondo Semillas' sphere of intervention would be in the disaster reconstruction landscape and at which stage of reconstruction the Fund would intervene, as well as its specific contribution.
- 3. A gender lens is irrelevant in reconstruction.** Fondo Semillas needs to show how women are specifically exposed or vulnerable in the context of disasters, and how their needs should be recognized and their contributions made visible.

5.1 OUR DISASTER FRAMEWORK

Making WRC a permanent program area within Fondo Semillas has a triple rationale:

a) Disasters are human-made

Long-standing vulnerabilities in infrastructures, amplified by migrations and overpopulation in some areas, are submitted to enormous pressure. **This is why a preventive and proactive approach is required.** Earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes are natural phenomena, **but disasters are human-made situations created by the lack of adequate prevention measures** (for example, poor infrastructures).

This is why researchers and practitioners in the field talk about a **‘living with risk’** approach, which calls for **preventive and proactive strategies** over reactive ones, in order to decrease risks and increase capacities.

This includes a philanthropic sector where a more proactive funding is needed, especially in terms of tackling the climate emergency.

There is another “risk area”: natural hazards open a breach through which certain exploitative projects tend to get pushed. This is facilitated by communities’ inability –during a post-disaster situation– to play their usual guardian roles, or by individuals’ greater need of cash.

The prior points highlight an important conceptual shift that most funders have yet to make, since only **2% of the global funding was allocated to resilience, risk reduction and mitigation** after the 2017 disasters.

b) Disasters are cyclical

In a context of increased global climate emergency, and given Mexico’s specific exposure, donors are particularly interested in resilience as the intersection of social and environmental justice.

Calling for a continuous and sustained strategy, focused on building up communities’ resilience. In the context of a series of disasters, people on the ground have to deal with an accumulation of vulnerabilities and damages caused by previous unaddressed disasters, rather than with the aftermath of a single event.

This is not limited to harder to reach areas. Indeed, several urban studies in the past decades mapped the risk profile of Mexico City and recommended **framing disasters as the direct result of poor urban planning**, for instance water scarcity due to overexploitation of aquifers, poor drainage systems, urban settlements in risky areas, ecological risk due to the high concentration of polluting industries, and others.

THIS IS WHY MANY PROTAGONISTS (BOTH GOVERNMENTAL AND FROM CIVIL SOCIETY) ADVOCATE FOR RESILIENCE MEASURES AS ONE OF THE KEY LESSONS OF THE 2017 EARTHQUAKES IN MEXICO. FROM THE WRC POINT OF VIEW, THE OFFICIAL DEFINITION FOR RESILIENCE NEEDS TO BE COMPLEMENTED BY CONSIDERING REMOTE RURAL AREAS AND LEFT-BEHIND URBAN AREAS WITHIN CITIES (E.G., MIGRANTS’ URBAN SETTLEMENTS); FURTHERMORE, WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE THE CORE NEXUS OF INTERVENTION, AIMING TO A LONGER-TERM PROGRAM.

c) Disasters are collective

They affect the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of communities in ways not always visible or tangible in the immediate aftermath. When intervention strategies are led from primarily affected grassroots communities, initiatives are more likely to have long-lasting impact. This is a **calling for community-led and participatory strategies**.

Disasters have far-reaching implications for communities, since they destroy their living and working spaces, as well as the resources to generate income, triggering displacement (often of men) and producing a deep change in the collective fabric of communities, both socially and culturally.

Hence, **it is important to rebuild the social fabric in communities**, since the ability of a given community to successfully rebuild is strongly related to how the community worked before the disaster. This requires a **proactive approach to build resilient communities ahead of disasters**, which is the approach privileged by WRC.

With regard to another argument in favor of making the WRC a permanent area within Fondo Semillas, the participatory selection process, which focuses on grassroots communities, allows the **inclusion of women's groups located in harder-to-reach areas and underserved communities**. Interestingly, **people's relationship to risk is fundamentally linked to power, especially for lower income groups**, since power structures make people more superstitious and fatalist because they are not only ignored but totally disregarded, so they perceive power as not being their business, although it is at the root of vulnerabilities. (Hewitt K., 2009)

To counterbalance this power dynamic, it is essential to involve all communities, importantly including the most underserved ones, in participatory and community-led interventions. This applies at a risk reduction level, to ensure the full participation and ownership of people most endangered, and also for professionals –such as Fondo Semillas– in order to co-develop intervention strategies led by women that reinforce communities' resilience.

5.2 KEY IMPLICATIONS: RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

a) Our model: community leadership

WRC filled a gap in the disaster reconstruction landscape: whereas the government, several international NGOs, private donors and local organizations focused on rebuilding the damaged essential infrastructure, the audits conducted to determine loss often ignored the fundamental needs of women.

Unfortunately, this is a frequent diagnostic in many disaster reconstruction settings: 'When the members [of WRC grantee-partner] asked the authorities about the damages in terms of bread ovens and stoves, they realized that there was no census for such damages, and that this type of impairment had not been taken into account.' (WRC grantee-partner) So, suddenly there was a shortage or incapacity to produce the food necessary for the survival of the community.

Another common issue mentioned by grantee-partners is the **corruption of the authorities**. Financial aid never comes, leaving entire groups or villages stranded. In addition, in women's groups there is a sense that some of the 'solutions' promoted by government authorities follow a one-size-fits-all logic, without taking the context into account: 'Many organizations and institutions outside the affected communities tried to impose generic aid plans that do not adapt to the needs, customs or traditions of the residents.' (*Grantee-partner auto-diagnostic*). This has a negative impact for long-term recovery.

WRC-supported projects made a major difference, filling the gaps left by government and other institutional actors, and redirecting some of the philanthropic efforts where it was needed, while focusing specifically on women.

b) Our strength: people-focused

Looking across organizations operating broadly under a humanitarian aid framework in Mexico, it is obvious that none of them is solely working along the lines of relief: among them, **a general understanding is that disaster mitigation strategy is bonded to prevention.**

This is why Fondo Semillas' strategy is **people-focused**: this lens puts the human factor at the center of reconstruction, stressing the value of capable communities, sustainable, inclusive and resilient development, and sustainable care. This would provide a logical bridge between reconstruction work and Fondo Semillas' tasks more generally. Its name should reflect the WRC mission: **RESILIENT COMMUNITIES.**

c) Our perimeter: key guardrails

Fondo Semillas, in conjunction with Oxfam, UNDP and the Cántaro Azul Foundation identified five major risk scenarios for Mexico:



Natural hazards of strong magnitude:

Floods and tropical hurricanes, with secondary effects that include localized flooding, building collapses and epidemics.

Droughts, which have secondary effects that include food insecurity, water shortages and mass displacements of population.





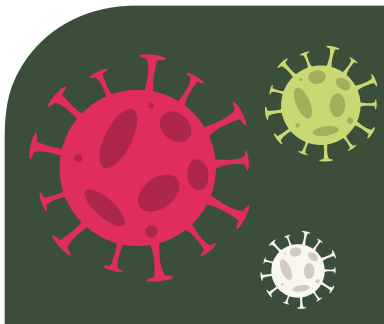
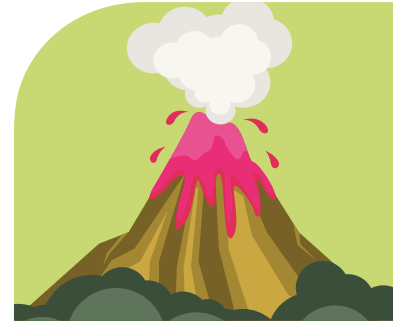
Earthquakes:

Secondary events are localized flooding, fires, landslides, and lack of access to essential services.



Volcano eruptions:

Localized in specific regions in Mexico.



Epidemics:

(At the time of finalizing this report, Fondo Semillas started to bring support to women's groups affected by the COVID-19 crisis in 2020).



Other risk scenarios –violent social conflicts, femicides, migrations, and aggression against human rights defenders– are already prioritized within other Fondo Semillas programs.



FOR PROGRAMMATIC CLARITY, THE INTERVENTION FOR THE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES PROGRAM AND ITS SELECTION PROCESS SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON **WOMEN'S GROUPS OPERATING AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE DEFENSE OF TERRITORY –SPECIFICALLY IN HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED AND HIGHLY MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES–** TO SUPPORT THEM IN RECOVERING OR BUILDING UP THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND STRENGTHENING THEIR RESILIENCE TOOLS.

RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM WRC TO RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

a) There are three main concerns in setting up WRC for the longer term:

1 Over-stretching Fondo Semillas' strengths: This requires keeping on building strategic partnerships with reconstruction specialist allies.

2 Coping with unequal flows of donation: As already pointed out, there are currently fewer funds dedicated to long-term resilience initiatives than to the immediate emergencies of the disaster aftermath:

- Fondo Semillas must build a **fund-raising strategy** that relies on intersectionality, therefore targeting not only traditional disaster philanthropy but also feminist philanthropy, especially at the intersection with eco-feminism and the defense of territory.
- It would be positive to pool funding from multiple donors into a **common fund dedicated to Resilient Communities**, led by a consortium of sister organizations involving Fondo Semillas and others.

3 Sustaining grantee-partners' participation: in the absence of immediate disasters or urgency, it is difficult to keep grantee-partners motivated. However, Resilient Communities would focus on supporting women-led projects and on strengthening communities, so community leaders could create innovative approaches to keep participants engaged in these projects.

b) Profiles of grantee-partners under Resilient Communities

Within WRC, two key profiles of grantee-partners emerged:

Newcomers: groups that consolidated themselves because of the earthquakes in 2017, without prior experience of working together as a collective.

Established: groups that have been operating since before the earthquake (as opposed to having been previously involved in disaster recovery).

It is recommended keeping the focus on first-timers, in a bid to involve harder-to-reach, most underserved communities. By priming first-timer organizations —organizations that have been working together for at least one year but have never accessed funding before— within Resilient Communities, we can ensure the diversity of funding for the women's movement in the country. It is also a way to reach isolated women's groups, working in partnership with historically underserved and ignored communities.

CONCLUSION



In essence, WRC—and the women's groups it supported on the ground—managed to set in motion:

- Getting women outside the limits of their homes, countering their isolation, so they could get together in women-only spaces to socialize.
- The women's groups also organized activities, workshops or local cultural events to bring together a broader community (including men, elders, children), and sometimes neighboring towns or villages, therefore initiating new networks of collaboration.
- Some women's groups secured their space to gather, as well as contributed to the construction of women's centers, which did not exist previously.
- While women's participation in public assemblies will require some more time to blossom, there is a clear sense among women of a new-found identity and voice, and an awareness of their reconstruction abilities too.

Recovery does not end when the WRC grant stops: There is still a long way to go—our grantee -partners know this, our donors know this, and Fondo Semillas knows it as well.

This requires a major mindset shift when thinking of 'disasters.' The learnings of WRC—and the experience of the women's groups it supported—entail new opportunities for women in Mexico: "I think what ultimately is the sad reality is that the rebuilding, the reconstruction and recovery process for even just the 2017 earthquakes is going to be so extensive. I don't want to put a number on it, but it's like 10 plus years, at least. And then the other sad reality is that there's going to be many other types of disasters that take place in Mexico, in the near term, medium to long term, including earthquakes." (WRC donor interview)

TO FONDO SEMILLAS, ADVOCATING IN FAVOR OF RESILIENT COMMUNITIES CONSTITUTES A DELIBERATE CHOICE TO KEEP ON SUPPORTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP, SINCE THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN-LED ORGANIZING AND GRASSROOTS COMMUNITIES' LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN AT THE HEART OF FONDO SEMILLAS' MISSION. FONDO SEMILLAS BELIEVES IN THE SYSTEMIC IMPORTANCE OF SHIFTING THE POWER TOWARDS THOSE WHO ARE EMBEDDED IN THE REALITIES AND CONTEXTS WHERE RELIEF AID TENDS TO GET DIRECTED. THESE BELIEFS WILL BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF FONDO SEMILLAS' NEW PROGRAM, RESILIENT COMMUNITIES.