



PHOTO: VIVIAN JACOBS / PEACEBUILDING PROJECT

## PEACEBUILDING PROJECT ADDRESSING COVID-19 RELATED CONFLICTS THROUGH THE COMPLEX CRISIS FUND

The Peacebuilding Project, known as the *Tejiendo Paz* project in Spanish, is a five-year USAID project implemented by Creative Associates in partnership with PartnersGlobal and ProPaz. The project is designed to reduce social conflict and violence and strengthen social cohesion at the community and municipal levels in four departments of the Western Highlands of Guatemala (Huehuetenango, Quiché, San Marcos, and Totonicapán), as well as strengthen the Government of Guatemala's (GoG) capacity in managing and responding to local conflicts. In 2021, the project received \$6 million from the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF) to respond to the urgent need to mitigate conflict and violence during the COVID-19 crisis. The CCF complements already existing programming that *Tejiendo Paz* has been implementing prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

The COVID-19 crisis is particularly devastating for vulnerable communities in Guatemala that already experience social conflict, have limited access to government services, and suffer from high levels of poverty. How can we support communities during this deepening health crisis as they respond to the pandemic's devastating effects, which are undermining development gains, exacerbating existing conflicts, and giving rise to new ones?

### THE RESPONSE

With the Complex Crisis Funds, the project can immediately start working in 50 new communities located in six additional municipalities (within the projects approved geographic area) to develop action plans that respond to conflicts that have emerged as a result of the pandemic. Municipal authorities, which the project will work closely with to improve communication and collaboration around conflict management, play a critical role in mitigating conflict in the context of continued COVID-19 restrictions and responses. The additional funding will leverage existing CARSI funding that addresses root causes of crime and insecurity, which include supporting preventative and development programs to ensure that citizens are secure.



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**Addressing Underlying Causes of Irregular Migration:** One consequence of increased conflict is irregular migration. In any context, when conflict escalates, people flee their communities in search of safer environments. Irregular migration from Guatemala continues to be a critical foreign policy issue for the United States government (USG) and the GoG. The Western Highlands has some of the highest rates of migration in the country. The project recognizes that social conflict is often a driver of irregular migration and that migration can be a trigger for further conflict, particularly in the context of returnees reintegrating into their communities during the COVID-19 crisis. As noted, with the CCF, the project will implement activities aimed at reducing violence and conflict in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, thereby addressing an underlying driver of irregular migration. In addition, the project will engage youth, who express a greater intention to migrate, in meaningful civic participation through education and conflict prevention initiatives.



### **Preventing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Strengthening Women's Civic Participation:**

**Preventing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Strengthening Women's Civic Participation:** Domestic and gender-based violence is often seen as a private issue and is thus not publicly addressed, which perpetuates the problem. However, GBV affects public life as much as private life. It contributes to the disintegration of the social fabric in already vulnerable communities and limits the effective civic participation of women. COVID-19 has worsened GBV, which is endemic in the Western Highlands and has been identified by project communities as a critical issue. The project will implement a communication strategy for the prevention and reduction of domestic violence and provide grants for GBV prevention services. The project will also implement activities designed to create sustainable gender equality and lasting peace by providing women tools to increase their potential for civic participation.



**Improving Governance of Key Public Institutions:** Many conflicts in the Western Highlands are rooted in low levels of citizen trust in government institutions, a lack of government presence in rural areas, and poor coordination between government and civil society. These factors have the potential to trigger additional conflicts as COVID-19 cases continue to rise and vaccines are distributed. Through the CCF, the project will implement a capacity building program for GoG and civil society representatives with focus on supporting a coordinated response to the COVID-19 crisis in the Western Highlands. The project will also work with GoG institutions to design effective strategic crisis communications strategies that address COVID-19 related conflicts. Finally, the project will support an early warning and response system that allows authorities to recognize and respond to conflicts before they become acute crises.



**Engaging with Indigenous Peoples as Partners:** Indigenous authorities are key partners in resolving social conflict and preventing conflict from escalating into crisis and violence. If indigenous communities are not active partners in identifying the causes of and responses to conflicts that emerge because of the COVID-19 pandemic, any proposed solutions are unlikely to be effective and may result in further conflict if they are not culturally sensitive. The project will establish an advisory council of respected indigenous authorities to provide feedback on addressing conflicts within the context of COVID-19. Given the importance of ancestral knowledge, systems, and practices in the implementation of effective, alternative mechanisms of dialogue, mediation, and negotiation, the project will engage indigenous peoples in its conflict mediator network and will identify opportunities to share best practices with GoG institutions and civil society. The project will also coordinate closely with the USG initiative *La Ruta – Reunion entre Pueblos*, which is designed to promote dialogue and coordination between the GoG and indigenous authorities, in two predominantly indigenous municipalities.