

# SUCCESS STORY

## Tejiendo Paz launches a network of conflict mediators in the Western Highlands.

By: Janey Fugate

\* Photography: Cabecera de Comitancillo/Peacebuilding Project



COVID-19 made Zoom graduation ceremonies a hallmark of the year 2020. In the Western Highlands of Guatemala, one such celebration took place to honor over 30 men and women who completed 12 sessions and over 30 hours of training in conflict mediation, a needed skill in a region plagued with persistent social conflict.

Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Peacebuilding Project led the training whose first group of graduates established a new network of conflict mediators.

Known as “Tejiendo Paz” in Spanish, the project addresses violence and conflict related to land, natural resources, youth, family and gender issues and governance. Tejiendo Paz gives communities the tools to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflicts, and work towards their own development.

“Conflict in Guatemala has a complex history and affects every segment of society, so addressing it requires a nuanced and community-oriented approach,” says Miguel Balan, the Director of External Relations and Social Conflict at Tejiendo Paz. “The network is an important way we are sharing tools and knowledge around conflict mediation with both individuals and organizations.”

From four departments in the Western Highlands, the 14 men and 18 women in the inaugural class represent a range of government and civil society organizations. By design, their training and knowledge will enrich their institutions and create a ripple effect in their communities.

***“Employing dialogue effectively as a resolution tool in intense situations requires both courage and skill”***

Luz Lainfiesta, Tejiendo Paz’s Deputy Chief of Party.



Totonicapán is one of the four departments in Guatemala's Western Highlands that Tejiendo Paz works in.



Graduates from Tejiendo Paz's conflict mediation training. From left: Delfino Jimenez, María Amezcuita and Ernesto Morales



"I see this as a social risk management mechanism," says Lilian Contreras, the Project Coordinator for the Partnership for Integral Development in Huehuetenango and a new member of the network. "I believe that there is a need for a mechanism, or this type of structure, in order to be in constant review of social conflict."

Despite the pandemic's disruption, the mediators completed the comprehensive training. They learned how to facilitate constructive dialogue in tense situations, how to employ analytical skills to discern the key actors in a case, and about the importance of staying neutral when navigating conflict.

Importantly, the mediators' network does not replace the justice system. Rather, training equips mediators to know when to bring issues to the authorities and when to work to resolve issues amongst affected parties before they escalate.

"I believe the method of the network is to promote dialogue," says Contreras. "Through the information we gather, we identify the difference between the matters that require justice and those that require the mediators' intervention."

## TOOLS FOR CONFLICT MEDIATION.

Healthy dialogue, known as a soft skill, can generate and expand cooperation. Many participants have jobs or roles in their community that place them in positions where they will confront conflict. The training prepares them to handle these situations constructively and know which government services or other resources can best serve specific needs.

"I really liked the methods of arbitration, conciliation and negotiation," says Maria Amezcuita, a graduate of the first class of mediators. Many mediators identified access to essential resources as a primary source of conflict. For instance, Amezcuita says that ambiguity around which communities can claim certain water rights is a serious matter of ongoing strife in Totonicapán, her municipality. "We are hoping to resolve this through a series of dialogues led by the government," she says.

Another topic focused on cultural sensitivity. The Western Highlands is a predominantly indigenous region, with communities speaking different Mayan languages even within the same municipality.

"One of the greatest challenges I see for me as a conflict mediator is that each town has its own culture, its way of understanding, its way of seeing things," says Ernesto Morales, representing the Cooperation for Rural Western Development.

Morales says that learning to create a matrix, or map, for each situation can offer a basis to begin the resolution process in any context.

In Comitancillo, a remote, predominantly indigenous municipality, understanding the layers of cultural complexity is essential when looking at conflict. Delfino Jimenez, a community elder and member of his local council of Maya leaders, says his community's trust in traditional leaders has eroded.

"People only want to talk about fines, money and lawyers," he says, before seeing if mediation can reach an agreement.

Jimenez hopes to use strategies he learned to restore trust within his community and to de-escalate social conflict.





Lilian Contreras assists Peacebuilding efforts on issues ranging from access to resources to discrimination.

### RESTORING SOCIAL FABRIC

Restoring trust is a key theme for the network. The mediators’ underlying goal is twofold — to foster a broader mending of the social fabric of the Western Highlands and to rebuild Guatemalans’ trust in authorities and institutions.

“If the conflict is between the people and the government, why do the people protest? Why do they march? Because they are not heard,” says Morales. “They also don’t raise their needs [with authorities].”

Broken by long years of violence, discrimination towards indigenous communities and poverty, the Western Highlands face high rates of conflict every year.

Carlos Sarti, the Executive Director of ProPaz Foundation, Creative’s implementing partner for Tejiendo Paz, in his opening remarks at the mediators’ kick-off event, traced the roots of social conflict to the 36-year civil war. He said the Peace Accords of 1996 gave the country a framework to move forward, but that the work is far from over.

“Despite not being fully implemented, the peace agreements have led to positive changes in intersectoral relations. As a society, we have the challenge of taking them back in their integrity,” he says.

Through dialogue, conflict mediation and knowledge, the network aims to be a part of this restoration, bringing a vision for a more peaceful society.

“We are now forming an attitude... so that we can really have peaceful co-existence, which is so necessary for what a social fabric should be,” says Contreras.

Photos by Vivian Jacobs

