

# SUCCESS STORY

**Máximo and María, two K'iché Facilitators, are contributing to the peace of the Mayan communities despite the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Máximo Chovón and María León have been community facilitators for peace since 2014, working with communities in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Max and Mari go out to communities on a daily basis to facilitate processes of dialogue, reflection, and collective learning to support community conflict resolution in a timely and peaceful manner, thus preventing acts of violence that have negative impacts on the communities. Max and Mari are genuine, responsible, and are always willing to help. These qualities combined with their understanding of the world and knowledge of Mayan practices for conflict resolution have allowed Max and Mari to collaborate with and earn the trust of the indigenous authorities which has been fundamental for their work.

Having grown and worked their whole life in the Western Highlands, Max and Mari know that it is a region with a diversity of social conflicts resulting from the historic and widespread marginalization, endemic poverty, and inequality. From experience, they know that these conflicts are usually addressed with short-term tactics to resolve the crisis without addressing their root cause, leading to conflicts reemerging over time thus resulting in death and the destruction of natural resources and infrastructure. That is why

*"I am from Nahualá and grew up viewing conflict as a negative thing; I have now understood that it can be an opportunity to promote community development, through conflict resolution in communities."*



Maximo Chovón has been married for 19 years and has two children who are 17 and 12 years old. He is the oldest child of three brothers. He is a Technical Expert in Community Development.

*"The Peacebuilding Project has given me the opportunity to support the most vulnerable, abandoned and most isolated communities to strengthen their capacities for self-management."*

*"Conflicts are part of everyday life, the problem is when one responds with violence, which is why communities need to be strengthened to manage conflicts in a peaceful manner through dialogue."*



María León is a Mayan K'iché woman from Tonicapán, who has been married for 21 years and has three children who are 3, 10 and 20 years old. She is the fifth daughter of eight siblings. She is a Social Worker.

*"The Peacebuilding Project has given me the opportunity to strengthen my skills and capacities as a woman, as a Mayan K'iché, and as a person."*

## Máximo and María, staying with the communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

In March 2020, community work was abruptly disrupted by the arrival of COVID-19. The established restrictions on mobilization, curfews, and social distancing protocols prevented Max and Mari from being able to visit the communities. However, they both knew the importance of keeping in touch with community members, showing them that they are not alone and that they can still count on the Peacebuilding Project.

Max and Mari knew that cellphones are one of the most widely used communication devices in the field, and thus decided to create WhatsApp groups, text messages and phone calls to stay in touch with the indigenous authorities, COCODES, women and youth.

Max mentioned that, at first, because there was no prior experience working in a virtual way, “I was concerned about how people were going to react, whether or not people were going to listen to us, but I made several calls and asked different audiences if they were willing to be part of the WhatsApp groups to maintain the communication and most of them kindly agreed.” “After the selection was made, we saw participation, collaboration and commitment from participants” said Max.

Maria has maintained a permanent flow of communication with the community mayors or vice-mayors of the 48 cantons, who represent the community authority, and also with other groups who were selected taking into account “the participation, consistency, support and leadership of the women, youth and the authorities”.

For Max and Mari, the experience of communicating remotely with different actors has been very valuable and interesting, especially since some people who were introverted in-person have been able to open up and express themselves with greater confidence and freedom through virtual calls or interviews. The field work served as a foundation for these groups and the earlier interactions were essential for establishing the bonds of trust.

“The fact that the communities have kept us by their side during these difficult times, despite the limitations and distance, has consolidated our ties and trust with the communities and has allowed us to continue supporting their efforts to finalize their community visions for peace” said Maria. “This process of working collectively on visions has created a community forum that has allowed diverse sectors of the community to come together, reflect, have dialogues and make decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, while preventing the emergence of new conflicts” said Max.

Max and Maria have maximized innovation, ingenuity and creativity to be able to meet their required work objectives and achieve the expected results even without their physical presence in the communities. Local links were delegated to some of the communities to facilitate communication and the flow of information.

The Community Vision is a participatory and inclusive planning tool, based on the dialogue, reflection and collective learning of various sectors of the community on community conflicts and their causes, to build a collective vision on how they will be resolved peacefully, improving social cohesion, development and peace.



26 communities built their Community Visions for Peace, with the support. Of Max, Mari and other community facilitators.



## REWARDING

"The trust that has been placed in me by the people whom, at the time, I had direct communication with has been rewarding and satisfying; but the most rewarding thing for me is that the group of young people we are working with has decided to support their own community through prevention efforts in the midst of a pandemic."

Max Chovón

"It was very gratifying to see that through the dialogues we had with women, how one of the midwives, who is a very good leader, began to mentor the young ladies (...) how the project allowed other issues to be addressed, such as the reduction of teen pregnancies, and the issue of gender-based violence, which somehow became life lessons for the girls who were there with us."

Mari León

## Supporting the work of indigenous authorities

Indigenous authorities are key partners of the Peacebuilding Project. As legitimate actors who are recognized by the community, they are key to peaceful conflict resolution. *"By working with community authorities who have been democratically and legitimately elected by communities, in the case of Toto, where 98% of the population is Kiché, the indigenous people are directly involved, they are the representatives, (...) I have witnessed their commitment, and how they consider the project to be an ally that has been contributing to the development of their functions",* concludes María.

According to Max, *"ancestral practices are fundamental to the implementation of alternative and effective methods for dialogue, mediation and negotiation"*

After seeing how important the role of the indigenous authorities is in containing the spread of the coronavirus and preventing conflicts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, María and Max distributed safety kits for the indigenous authorities of 14 communities in the municipalities of Totonicapán and San Pedro Nécta.



Having the consent and availability of the authorities allowed the work that had begun in-person in the communities to continue "fortunately they gave us a space" says María "within their responsibilities, they have specific tasks, but communication with them has still been constant, permanent and very good (...) it was helpful that our project was not only to assist them but to contribute to the reduction of conflict and peace-building."

## ABOUT THE COMMUNITY VISION

*"The Community Vision was very participatory, men and women participated and somehow the voice of youth is also reflected. Most of the information found in the vision comes from the life experiences of the community members, they also feel happy to know that the drawings they created will be included. Most interestingly, within community visions, strategies and activities were established to address the issue of conflict in a profound way."*

María León

*"Community members identified visions as a tool to solve or transform their conflicts"*

Máximo Chovón

## There are always challenges to overcome

Like everything in life, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to Max and Mari's work and personal life. Combining work with their role as a father and mother respectively was also a challenge for both. However, as the months progressed, they have been able to spend more time with their family and be more efficient at work.

As a facilitator, María says that one challenge she faced in building community visions came from conducting interviews "some interviews took thirty-five minutes, but others took more than an hour and for the communities to collaborate by giving us time and space was an achievement."

For Max, one of the biggest challenges was "maintaining ongoing communication with leaders, women, and youth in each community (...) we had good, frank and transparent communication which resulted in increased trust in me and the project. "

Another challenge was maintaining communication with the municipal authorities, to let them know that the Peacebuilding Project was still operating. Having the recognition, support and endorsement from the municipal authorities was key to being able to continue activities remotely. When working with the community mayors, they told us "the mayor told us to give you all our support when you need it because the Peacebuilding Project is a serious project that continues to work in the community," Max said.