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Azul Positivo's community response strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zulia

Interview with Yordy Bermúdez, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Officer at Azul Positivo

By Andrea Pacheco, Protection Officer at Oxfam

YB: Hello, my name is Yordy Bermúdez and I am a member of the Azul Positivo team. I work as MEAL coordinator for the project implemented with Oxfam.

AP: Thank you, Yordy. What was the context in which Azul Positivo developed its community response strategy to the COVID-19 pandemic in the communities where the activities are carried out?

YB: We are currently assisting six communities in the Zulia State, implementing training workshops for community health promoters. One of the modules of this workshop is "Development of community projects", which focuses on the needs and interests of the communities that are being assisted in the COVID-19 context. The module trains men and women from several age groups so that they can identify the problems in their communities, set objectives and suggest solutions. The six communities have made great contributions, and they are exploring strategies to minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their population.

AP: In this regard, Yordy, how is the pandemic affecting the communities where the response is being implemented? Has the virus spread? How were the communities facing the situation before the implementation of the project?

YB: It has been a great challenge here, as the COVID-19 pandemic is compounded by other issues, like the lack of water or people's limited resources to buy items like soap, which is essential for handwashing. Failure to wear face masks is also contributing to the spreading of the virus in these communities. In the face of this situation, the communities have identified options and solutions during the training modules to minimise the impact of the virus. I should also mention the lack of petrol, and the political situation, as people are being polarised in Venezuela, and we could be labelled as "enemies". This is a challenge that needs to be mitigated in the communities. Little by little, we have faced the political leaders and engaged in a dialogue with them. We showed them that our position is not political, and that our goal is to support the communities and alleviate the situation they are facing.

AP: In which area are these communities located in the Zulia State? What is current situation in the Zulia State, bearing in mind that a few weeks ago it was the source of infection at national level?

YB: The Zulia State is divided in terms of flexibility and quarantine measures. There are border municipalities between Colombia and Venezuela, and they are perceived as an entry point of people infected with COVID-19 from Colombia. In these municipalities a "radical quarantine" is

applied, with restrictions for daily activities. Azul Positivo is in Maracaibo, and we currently have flexibility until 5pm, so we can work a bit more. One of the communities that we are supporting is in San Francisco, and another one in Mara, where we have faced greater challenges and where the official leaders see us as a threat. However, we have explained to them the nature of our work, and we have managed to establish a relationship with some bodies from the Zulia State, as the Regional Health Coordination Office. We have worked as well with communal police, in collaboration with some mayors, which allowed us to stay in several communities as the official leaders don't see us anymore as a threat. They can see that we are neither in their favour nor against them. Our team has applied the principle that we need to work for the people, whoever they are: red, blue, green... we need to work for the people.

AP: Talking a bit more about the context, Yordy, what are the main challenges faced by the population from Zulia and the communities you are assisting to prevent the spread of the virus? You already mentioned water, but is there water available in the communities supported by the project? And you mentioned petrol as well; how is Azul Positivo managing to travel to the communities and support them?

YB: Regarding the humanitarian context, we have visited some communities where people have to walk long distances to get water. Some people have to decide whether to buy soap or flour, or a kilogram of rice. People usually prioritise buying food. Buying petrol is increasingly a challenge, as it is becoming scarcer, and that feeds speculation. Petrol is very expensive, and it is the more and more required to pay for it with dollars in cash. Staff are only coming to the office when it is essential, as public transport is increasingly inefficient and packed, which increases the risk of infection as social distancing is not respected. We are not putting the staff and the rest of people in the organisation at risk.

We try to apply all the biosecurity measures, as there is at least one case of COVID-19 in all the communities, either symptomatic or asymptomatic. Whenever we visit a community, we try to make the most of the time that we are there, and we go in groups of three or four to assist as many people as possible. There is always a way to do our job.

AP: It surprises me what you explained about the use of dollars in cash, when the official currency is the bolivar. Could you tell me a bit more about the process for the circulation of dollars?

YB: The circulation of dollars is not officially recognised by the state, but there are some municipalities in Zulia where not only dollars are used, but also Colombian pesos. Using Venezuelan money is a big challenge, as there is no cash, and people who have it know that its value decreases each day. If you want to save money, the way to do it is with dollars or with digital money (in dollars as well), as inflation swallows savings in bolivars every day. People are saving money in dollars, but it's increasingly difficult to have cash, which is what's going on in most of the Zulia State.

AP: In the communities where you are operating, what are the traditional livelihoods? What do people do for a living, and how are they facing this situation, with salaries being paid in bolivars?

YB: This has been an important issue in the communities. In two communities close to the main COVID-19 hotspot, known as the Maracaibo Flea Market, most everyone worked there either formally or informally. The market was closed for a long time, and that created a difficult situation in people's households, as their livelihoods depended on it.

In other communities, they have coped with the loss of livelihoods by getting into the lake (in the centre of Maracaibo). With a *canudita* (a traditional fishing rod), people had to resort to artisanal fishing, praying to God to catch something to eat.

Other people had no choice but extracting soil from the bottom of the lake, sun-drying it and selling it for construction, even if constructions are virtually halted in the state.

The situation is very challenging, and people are struggling a lot to have access to income. If they decide to start a business at home, they need to set up a digital payment system, as there is no cash. But that is a challenge as well, as the phone network is very weak and blackouts are common, which hinders the access to wire transfers.

People sell cakes, biscuits, etc., everything in dollars, as the Venezuelan currency is virtually out of circulation in the state. There are shops where bolivars are not accepted. Some colleagues had to pay between two and three dollars for transportation to come into the office. Transport is very limited due to petrol prices, so the very little (and informal) transport still in place is charged in dollars. Because of the shortage of transport, people have to pay for it in dollars.

You can only withdraw a very limited amount of cash from the bank; 300,000 bolivars (less than a dollar), which is not even enough to pay for a bus ticket to get back home. ATMs are out of order, as there is no cash. People only go to the bank to open accounts or sort out issues, but not to withdraw money. That's why you have to find people who sell dollars.

AP: To wrap up on the context, could you explain the situation that women and girls are facing in this crisis? We have seen that some of the coping mechanisms are artisanal fishing or extracting soil for construction. What do women do to cope with this situation?

YB: There are several ways. For example, in a traditional family made of a father, a mother and their children, the source of employment for an adult man is limited. Women are forced to work for food as domestic cleaners, cleaning patios, etc. In the city, we can see the "manual cleaning" of the streets, and most of the workers are women. They are forced to work on this, but the salary doesn't even amount to one dollar a week. They get a bag of food from the State, with just four products, most of them carbohydrates. People are working for food, that's the current reality.

As a coping mechanism, women have expanded their informal working schemes, preparing cakes and selling cigars and candy in the street. We have also seen situations where women and girls are sexually exploited and forced to perform sex in exchange for food in order to survive.¹

AP: Regarding the sex for food situation what are the associated risks that have been identified?

YB: It is indeed risky. We are currently testing for HIV and syphilis, and we have diagnosed young girls from different age groups. We have diagnosed several women, either because they are being sexually exploited, or because they have children and are in toxic relationships with men who openly say they engage in sexual relationships with different women (this is increasingly difficult to happen, but we have seen some cases). The associated risks can be sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancies.

AP: We have talked about the context and the existing needs. Now I would like to go back to what you were explaining before about the six communities where your team is implementing a comprehensive response. We know that Azul Positivo's approach is based on its commitment and focus with the communities. How was this strategy developed?

YB: A while back, our strategy was to start by identifying someone in the community. We used to arrive greeting people and asking whether there was any community leader, or someone identified as such, so that this person could summon a group of active people from the community. Now, we rely on the structures in place, like the CLAP,² communal councils or street leaders. As there is already a structure in place, this makes the identification easier, as we cannot separate the leaders from the structures. If we did, we could be perceived as an "opposition group" or undesirable people. We rely on the structure set by the State or on structures with

1 Crises force people to adopt different survival mechanisms. Sometimes, those mechanisms are harmful for themselves and other people. Sexual exploitation, mentioned in this question, is one of those negative survival mechanisms.

2 Local supply and Production committees are part of the government policy for food security.

identified leaders. For example, a while ago there was a community with a negative leader (she organised illicit actions), but she has been reintegrated in society and is currently a positive leader who helps us identify the most vulnerable people.

We cannot be disconnected from the established structures with the type of work that we are conducting. For example, for our health-related activities, we are in contact with “Barrio Adentro”, which are popular clinics; and for food activities we engage with leaders that work in state-run food programmes.

This way of working allows us to mitigate some risks as well. When we work with leaders recognised by the State, we are perceived as allies, and not as opposition. This reduces risks, as if any leader outside of the community questions our work, the community leaders can defend our work and explain that we are not a threat for the work that the State is carrying out.

AP: There is an initial stage in which you identify or assess the situation in the community. How do you undertake this task?

YB: We start by identifying the different structures operating within each sector, the institutions (either health, security or religious ones) in the area, so that we can have a clear image of the community composition. We first identify allies and institutions that could support or improve our project. This image helps us know where to go if there is a security incident, or a health emergency, or to locate the authorities, etc, and do our job effectively. Some of our allies are community leaders, but also health staff and the police officers in the communities. For example, if we are going to deliver any items, as medicines or inputs, we ask the local authorities for help to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. The idea is to create a trusting environment by including these people who already work in the community, guaranteeing at the same time a more effective work.

AP: What is the work scheme of the community promoters?

YB: We have three schemes. One of the promoters lives nearby two communities and knows their leaders. And we regularly go to another community, where we are training some of our local allies. We are also training leaders in the communities. They are already leaders, but we train them on the topics that we have expertise on, as we need to build their capacity (on sexual health, food and prevention and protection against COVID-19) for when we exit the community. We also want to train leaders on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases or project development. We use different work schemes with the promoters, and we visit each of the six communities in groups of two or three people.

AP: How often do you go to the communities? How is the follow-up and support to the communities organised?

YB: It depends. Normally, when a colleague lives close to one of the communities that he or she is supporting, they go two or three times per week. If the community is in another area and takes longer to travel there, we go once a week or every other week. There is another promoter that visits the communities once or twice a week. And we visit another community just once a week or every other week because of the issue with the petrol.

We have trained community leaders so that they can collect data and forms when we need them. This way, when we visit the community, we already have the basic information and we can focus on the case. We build the capacity of these community focal points so that work has already advanced by the time we visit the community.

AP: How would you summarise the initiatives taken in these communities? Could you tell us more about the community networks that your team is engaging with? How is the process to integrate communities in their own protection? How was the approach? How did they react when they were told that it's in their hands to develop community action projects?

YB: It was very interesting, as it's important for people to feel that they are part of something. Being part of a network or a team motivates them to be proactive and to go the extra mile and be part of the solution. Unfortunately, the sense of belonging here has been fading away, but telling them that their group can have a name or a logo is very encouraging for them, because they can identify with it. Only 25% of the work has been done so far, but people already recognise us and say, for example, "this person is already building their capacity". These focal points are already referring cases so that people can seek for help. Our experience in the communities has been very positive; it has been great to train people so that they can be empowered. When Azul Positivo exits the communities, their leaders will remain there.

AP: What is the learning from this community-based approach? What would you recommend to people reading about this way of working?

YB: For me, the most important learning was that there is so much talent in the communities. And we need to work with those talents who were born in the communities, as they set the tone and pace and identify the type of projects needed. We cannot impose ourselves or believe we are better than them, as communities make great contributions from their own structures. We need to listen to the communities and discover the talent they have and let them set the tone and do a big part of the work. Just providing things or imposing ideas that do not fit well with the population's needs and interests does not work. We need to listen, identify and work alongside the people who live in the community.

I have many anecdotes from my own experience. I have been working in the organisation for more than 12 years, and we are still surprised by the talents we discover. Sometimes, when we are running a workshop, one of the participants is very quiet or doesn't engage much in the activities. But then, when the workshop is over, we discover that he or she is a natural leader with great work capacity and effectiveness. My recommendation is: "Keep listening to the communities. They must be part of the solution, because sometimes we arrive with what we believe it's a solution, but it's not. Even with the best of our intentions we can do harm. It must be the communities the ones identifying what can be done, because they are the ones that know the needs and how to cover them".