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## ANNUAL REPORT **2020**

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## PBI Mexico Project Team Members 2020

The people who made up PBI Mexico's team in 2020 came from 15 countries in Europe, the Americas and Oceania. Seventy per cent of those involved were volunteers – in the field, as part of the Project Committee or on the Training Committee. We would like to extend our profound gratitude for their extraordinary work every day to contribute to the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) in this country. Thank you to each and every team member for their dedication and commitment to PBI Mexico. The project's work would not be possible without your participation.

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*Ivi Oliveira* (Brazil)

*Melissa May Peña* (Colombia)

*Stefania Grasso* (Italy/Switzerland)

*Victor Alfonso Ávila García* (Colombia)

*Sergi Sendra* (Spanish State)

### Donors

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*Agencia Vasca de Cooperación al Desarrollo*  
(Basque Development Cooperation Agency)

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(Council of Valladolid)

*Ayuntamiento de Santander*  
(Council of Santander)

*Ayuntamiento de Paris*  
(Council of Paris)

*Barreau de Paris Solidarité*  
(Paris Bar Association - Solidarit)

*Basilian Human Development Fund*  
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*European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights*  
(EIDHR)

*EZA Basel-Stadt*

*Fédération Vaudoise de Coopération*  
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*Kirche St. Gallen-Tablat*  
(St. Gallen-Tablat Church)

*Kirchgemeinde Wallisellen*  
(Wallisellen Parish)

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(Civil Peace Service (CPS); German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development)

## EDITORIAL

# 2020: Between isolation, loneliness, struggle and hope

Nobody has escaped the impacts of 2020. In the best-case scenario, we had to shut ourselves in our houses for long periods of time; in the worst, we had to face fear of an unknown illness and grief at the sudden loss of our loved ones. All this was marked by isolation and loneliness. Every person in the world, for one reason or another, has been impacted by a new virus which, like a gigantic magnifying glass, served to highlight and magnify all the pre-existing conditions of our lives.

In Mexico, the health emergency has grafted itself on to a very damaging and – sadly – long-lasting human rights crisis. While there were some advances, we also noted a series of worrying setbacks.

We recognise that important actions were taken to attempt to resolve the serious issue of people who have been forcibly disappeared and are still yet to be located across Mexico. These include the recognition by the Mexican State of the competence of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, as well as the publication of the Standardised Protocol for Searching for Disappeared and Missing Persons (Protocolo Homologado para la Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas), and, last but not least, the agreement to establish the Extraordinary Mechanism for Forensic Identification (Mecanismo Extraordinario de Identificación Forense). It is also significant that the Escazú Agreement – the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean – was ratified, which will now allow the treaty to enter into force. This will promote the right to live in and protect a healthy environment; above all, it will make it incumbent on States to protect those who protect that healthy environment.

On the other hand, despite organised civil-society groups warning the government of the importance of maintaining a human rights focus as it attends to the health crisis and implements its responses, the situation has been very complicated.

With the government's austerity policy, 109 public trusts were cut, among them the Fund for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (Fondo para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas), as well as the Trust Fund for Help, Assistance and Holistic Reparation (Fideicomiso del Fondo de Ayuda, Asistencia y Reparación Integral). It is unclear what the plan is for institutions – like the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (Mecanismo de Protección para Defensores de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas) or the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas) – to continue with their mandates to protect human right defenders (HRDs) and victims, given there has been no end to the violence against HRDs.

According to a report on the situation of individuals defending human rights and freedom of expression in Mexico, between the beginning of the pandemic and

October 2020 there were at least 18 killings of HRDs, including nine environmental HRDs, five HRDs for a life free from violence, discrimination against women and the LGBTTTIQA+ community, as well as four journalists.

The cuts have also affected the budgets allocated to programs fighting violence against women, as well as maternal, sexual and reproductive health, causing deep concern to organisations like Amnesty International – Mexico, Equis [Ex] – Justice for Women (Equis – Justicia para las Mujeres), the National Network of Indigenous Women's Shelters (Red Nacional de Casas de las Mujeres Indígenas, CAMIS), and the National Refugee Network (Red Nacional de Refugios), to name just a few.

Finally, the pandemic and lockdown exacerbated inequality and violence, particularly gender-based violence, by forcing women, girls and boys to remain in private spaces in close contact with their perpetrators. This situation unleashed protests demanding access to justice in cases of violations of human rights and the right to a life free from violence, which were marked by the disproportionate deployment of State forces.

As PBI, we wish to remember all the human rights defenders whose lives have been cut short by COVID-19. Three such among many are Ángel Alberto Hernández Rivera, lawyer with the Committee for the Integral Defence for Human Rights 'Gobixha' (Comité de Defensa Integral de Derechos Humanos 'Gobixha', Código-DH); Marcelino Nolasco Martínez, community defender of territory and the right to life with the Tepeyac Human Rights Centre (Centro de Derechos Humanos Tepeyac) in Oaxaca; and Father Pedro Pantoja Arreola, founder and collaborator with the Saltillo Migrant Shelter (Casa del Migrante Saltillo, CMS).

Amid all of this and much more, and in a global pandemic, it has not been easy for PBI Mexico to remain in the country. With a reduced physical presence, and an increased digital presence, we have managed to continue our work. This is especially thanks to the team at the Mexico City Coordination Office, and the international solidarity and strong commitment of our volunteers; despite the great distances, our team maintained its solidarity with the organisations we collaborate with – who remain in the struggle.

**If the organisations we accompany continue their work, then so will we.**



Accompaniment to 'Tlachinollan' Human Rights Centre of the Montaña ©PBI México 2020

<sup>1</sup> [https://redtdt.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Reduced-5MB\\_Situacio%CC%81n-de-la-defensa-de-DDHH-y-LEX-en-MEX\\_Digital.pdf](https://redtdt.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Reduced-5MB_Situacio%CC%81n-de-la-defensa-de-DDHH-y-LEX-en-MEX_Digital.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://amnistia.org.mx/contenido/index.php/amnistia-internacional-seguira-vigilante-de-que-los-programas-para-atender-las-violencias-contra-las-mujeres-cuenten-con-presupuestos-para-su-aplicacion/>

# PBI Mexico in figures

In 2020, PBI Mexico provided international accompaniment to 11 organisations and two civil-society coordination spaces in Chihuahua, Coahuila, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla and Mexico City. PBI's accompaniment – which includes physical presence; national and international advocacy; awareness raising; training in security, protection, creation and maintenance of support networks; and facilitating spaces for dialogue between

HRDs and key actors in their protection – benefits more than 78 Mexican communities and/or civil-society organisations (CSOs) and 152 HRDs, of whom more than 65% are women human rights defenders (WHRDs). The work of these people and organisations benefits at least 24,021 others, who are thus secondary beneficiaries of PBI Mexico's efforts. This can have a nationwide impact on Mexico's human rights situation.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE	
Accompaniment, observation and monitoring	28
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ADVOCACY	
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5. Accompaniment to the commemorative march for the six years of the disappearance of the 43 normalistas of Ayotzinapa, September 26, 2020 ©PBI México 2020

**PBI provided international accompaniment to the following organisations in 2020:**

## OAXACA:

Committee for the Integral Defence of Human Rights 'Gobixha'(Código-DH); Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Gender Equity, Oaxaca (Consortium Oaxaca); Services for Alternative Education (EDUCA)

## GUERRERO:

Association of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Violations (AFADEM); 'Tlachinollan' Human Rights Centre of the Montaña

## CHIHUAHUA:

Paso del Norte Human Rights Centre; Sierra Madre Alliance (ASMAC)

## COAHUILA:

Saltillo Migrant House (CMS); Fray Juan de Larios Diocesan Human Rights Centre; Pasta de Conchos Family Organisation

## PUEBLA:

Peoples' Front in Defence of Land and Water in Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala (FPDTAMPT)

## CIUDAD DE MÉXICO:

Espacio\_OSC: Space for Civil Society Organisations; Focal Group on Business and Human Rights

# Interview with Joana Kathe, Civil Peace Service (CPS) consultant with PBI Germany



©PBI México

## Could you tell us a bit about the relationship between PBI Germany and CPS?

As a country group within PBI as an international organisation, PBI Germany considers itself primarily as a body that supports PBI's fieldwork. We do this, among other ways, within the framework of the Civil Peace Service (CPS) program. Financed by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), this program allows registered organisations, such as PBI Germany, to work together with local NGOs to contribute to positive peace-building. The central element of the CPS is sending international aid workers to support the implementation of a concrete project, generally for three years, together with a local organisation – like PBI Mexico.

## When and how did CPS's collaboration with PBI Mexico begin?

The first CPS project with PBI Mexico started in 2003, with two international aid workers. It arose from the need to strengthen PBI's work in Guerrero, to accompany the processes underway for establishing a regional office in Oaxaca, and to strengthen the advocacy and communication work through extensive analysis. Due to the success of that program, since then we have jointly completed a series of interesting projects which reinforce human rights work in Mexico.

## Why do you think that the work which PBI has developed over more than 20 years is necessary or important?

Because the continuing, sensitive development of protection strategies for human rights defenders is a central tool for allowing for sustainable peace to arise. PBI Mexico takes on this task with considerable experience, commitment and professionalism: in the field, in private meetings and in networks with a great number of diverse key actors. In recent years, the focus on gender and the specific measures for WHRDs have gained increasing space in international aid and human rights agendas.

## How is the agenda of the global women's movement influencing CPS's projects in Mexico?

I believe that the global movement for a holistic recognition of bodies other than the decidedly white and cis-male ones has revolutionary power. This struggle is transforming our societies, and it would be surprising and terrifying if this observation were not applied to the structure and content of our projects. Our task must be to support these struggles from a perspective of human rights, warning of the needs which arise from those struggles and continually adapting our tools to the situation.

## What other topics, recommendations or comments would you like to share with us?

I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate PBI Mexico for its successful trajectory and for its courage when it comes to maintaining its presence in Mexico in difficult times, with the aim that one day our work will be unnecessary.

## Firefly Collective (Colectivo Luciérnaga)

### A lighthouse to guide the disappeared

Following the 2019 disappearance of the Nahua indigenous human rights defender (HRD), Arnulfo Cerón Soriano, and the discovery of his body, dozens of relatives of disappeared people in Tlapa de Comonfort and the Montaña region of Guerrero decided to break the wall of silence. They had remained silent for fear of reprisals, but now they chose to organise themselves and together seek their loved ones by establishing the Firefly Collective, A Light in the Darkness (Colectivo Luciérnaga, una Luz en la Oscuridad).



*Colectivo Luciérnaga*

## The community of Coloradas de la Virgen, in the municipality of Guadalupe y Calvo, Chihuahua

### A long history of violence, harassment and threats against the community's traditional authorities for their defence of their forests

In the southern part of the state of Chihuahua, in the Sierra Tarahumara mountain range, is Coloradas de la Virgen, a territory of more than 49,500 hectares shared by the indigenous Rarámuri (predominantly) and Tepehuan (Odami) peoples, who live in 50 small ranches dispersed across the area. Household economies are based on subsistence agriculture, cattle, hunting and gathering.

The Rarámuri have historically faced a lack of presence of State authorities. They have little to no access to the most basic human rights like health, education and a healthy environment, and they have extremely limited employment options.

During the 1980s and '90s, the indigenous community fought against an atmosphere of attacks and violence, which led to murders, land appropriation and the plundering of forest resources.

Since 1973, at least 14 people from this community have been murdered because of their activity in defence of their territory. In 2017, Rarámuri and Tepehuan peoples, mentored by the Sierra Madre Alliance (ASMAC), decided to undertake legal action to request the cancellation of all forest usage permits.

With the aim of guaranteeing the physical integrity of the traditional authorities, legal representatives of Coloradas de la Virgen and staff from ASMAC requested protective measures from the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, run by the Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB), in December 2013. On February 20, 2014, the mechanism issued a resolution to provide coverage to the community defenders as well as representatives of ASMAC.

Arnulfo was disappeared on October 11, 2019 and his body was found 40 days later, in a clandestine grave more than three metres deep. The searches began thanks to national and international pressure on the authorities, which brought hope to other families.

As of February 2021, the collective is made up of more than 30 families and has conducted at least six day-long citizen searches. At the same time, Firefly Collective has met with Guerrero's Public Prosecutor (Fiscal del Estado de Guerrero) to demand a work plan and that progress be made in investigating their cases.

During the pandemic, all official searches were halted for several months, recommencing in December 2020.

The families in the collective have faced a range of acts of surveillance and harassment by organised criminal groups. One of the collective's members, indigenous Nuu Saviman Federico Aparicio Calixto, who was looking for his disappeared son, was found dead on August 26, 2020. In addition, the pandemic took the life of another collective member, Gregorio Santiago Otila, on June 8, 2020. Gregorio was seeking his wife, his daughter and his granddaughter, who were all disappeared in 2018.

In July that year, mechanism staff conducted a risk evaluation, and, given the extraordinary risks faced by the defenders, the protection plan was approved by the mechanism's governing board.

Julián Carrillo Martínez, leader of the Coloradas de La Virgen community, was persecuted, harassed and threatened for several years, and despite being a beneficiary of the protection mechanism, was murdered on October 24, 2018. With this crime, the public learned of other murders that had occurred in Julián's family in recent years: these included the murders of his son Víctor Carrillo (February 2016); two of his nephews, Antonio Alberto Quiñones and Guadalupe Carrillo Polanco (March and July 2017); and his son-in-law Francisco Chaparro Carrillo (July 2018).

Julián's murder came a few weeks after community members reported three individuals to government authorities because of a mining concession they were operating in the community's territory, authorised without free, prior and informed consent.

The threats continue to this day, even though, at the same time, a case is before the 5th District of the Unitary Agricultural Tribunal (Tribunal Unitario Agrario Distrito 5). This case seeks the annulment of forest usage permits which the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, SEMARNAT) had granted to the Coloradas ejido for the ancestral lands of Coloradas de la Virgen.



*Coloradas de la Virgen*

# Resilient responses in a pandemic: The experience of Consortium Oaxaca

Written by Consortium Oaxaca

The COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly transformed the work of defending human rights. It has brought lockdowns, as well as drastically limiting our ability to report crimes, demand responses, share information, take action and mobilise the public.

In the feminist organisation Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca (Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca), we have noted with concern that the impacts of the pandemic have a severe impact on women, with an increase in family and financial violence. To an alarming degree, we see that lockdowns have not diminished the acts of violence against women's bodies, rather the violence became more acute in public spaces. In that short period, we saw 50% of the cases of femicide and most cases of women being disappeared<sup>1</sup>.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) have not been exempt from this increase in violent acts, as well as facing specific risks due to their work promoting and defending human rights. During the pandemic, we documented an increase in online violence. Around half of the acts of aggression in this period were in the digital sphere, principally in social networks where WHRDs have been subjected to hate speech, threats and defamation, and the target of incitements to violence. This has particularly increased for WHRDs who defend the rights of women to live a life free of violence, and to have access to sexual and reproductive rights.

The attacks have not been limited to the digital realm, but instead they have been given concrete form, as in the cases of arbitrary detention and other attacks against feminist HRDs exercising their right to protest and free assembly in various Mexican states. This also became the case for our organisation when, on 15 June 2020, we received a threat of femicide opposite our offices. This came in the context of a digital campaign demanding justice for the femicide of María del Sol Cruz Jarquín, daughter of the WHRD and journalist Soledad Jarquín Edgar. This attack occurred after a series of acts of defamation and

hate speech in the digital realm, in the context of the campaign #JusticiaParaSol (#JusticeForSol).

Given this context, in Consortium Oaxaca we have sought to adapt our processes and transcend the limitations and impacts of the pandemic and the resulting increase in violence. We focused on developing creative strategies to continue the struggle to transform society through mobilising and accompanying women, always ensuring closeness, warmth and safety for women. We needed to create conditions to allow the team to respond to the new context, as well as responding promptly to the impacts of lockdown and the new family dynamics that we found ourselves in.

We also adapted our work of accompanying women in violent situations, moving to attention and accompaniment via phone and coordinating this work with other organisations. We thus strengthened our work of reporting crimes and demanding responses in the digital sphere, constantly publishing up-to-date information on violence against women and WHRDs. In this way we occupied the digital space as we would a public space, ensuring that the voices, demands and stories of women are heard.

In addition, we promoted ongoing gatherings and spaces for analysis to comprehend the complexities of the current context and to articulate responses (such as reporting crimes and demanding guarantees of safety in light of the increase in gender-based and state violence). We also adapted our virtual spaces to become a new safe space to heal and face the impacts of the heightened violence in the pandemic.

In this context, it has been vital to strengthen our international networks of advocacy, accompaniment and protection. The responses jointly created to report crimes and address a range of high-risk situations have been essential. PBI's accompaniment during this period strengthened our protection, in that it participated in our denouncement of the threat of femicide we received and thus helped prevent future attacks. We also collaborated with other networks like the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Front Line Defenders, the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IM-Defensoras) and other international allies with whom we have established deep and careful pathways to action in defence of human rights.

<sup>1</sup> Data reported in *Violencia feminicida: la pandemia ignorada* (<https://consorciooaxaca.org/violencia-feminicida-la-pandemia-ignorada>).







## The fight to defend territory and nature: The experience of the Peoples' Front in Defence of Land and Water in Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala

**Written by the Peoples' Front in Defence of Land and Water in Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala**

The Peoples' Front in Defence of Land and Water in Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala (Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra y el Agua Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala, FPDTAMPT) is a union of towns who agreed in an assembly to defend their territory against the Morelos Comprehensive Project (Proyecto Integral Morelos, PIM). It was founded in June 2012; its history dates to 2009, when the Puebla-Tlaxcala Peoples' Front (Frente de Pueblos Puebla-Tlaxcala) was created in the states of Puebla and Tlaxcala in response to the imposition of projects to build highways and thus appropriate communal lands.

The PIM is an energy megaproject that includes: a) a 160 km gas pipeline which runs around the zone of influence of the Popocatepetl volcano, increasing the risk of natural disaster for the 60 communities affected in Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala. This pipeline was constructed by Italian company Bonatti, which criminalised and imprisoned agrarian authorities and members of the Peoples' Front. Concessions for its operation have been granted to the Spanish companies Elecnor and Enagas; b) two thermoelectric plants in the indigenous community of Huexca. The first of these, already completed, was built by Spanish enterprise Abengoa and is being operated by the Federal Electricity Commission (Comisión Federal de Electricidad, CFE); the second is under construction; c) two aqueducts (26 and 12 inches in diameter). The first is designed to take 290 litres per second of the water supply to the ejidos of Ayala, in Morelos, to run the thermoelectric plant, while the second will return contaminated water; d) a 20 km high-tension power line.

The Peoples' Front fights to defend territory and nature, seeking to strengthen the autonomy of their communities. In addition to the social and legal struggle against the PIM, the communities seek opportunities for development and self-determination. They have organised a community radio station, established groups addressing health and organic farming, and promote the return to forms of government that include traditional habits and customs. They have re-initiated government by assembly, a traditional method which was losing currency in modern times.

Within the fight to defend the communities' territory from the PIM, women are a strong motor for the organisation. This goes from decision-making in their communities, to being the driving

force behind actions, to organising and attending all activities of defence and community organising. This has not occurred without difficulty in their communities, because of the prevailing macho culture, but the front's women have opened pathways within and outside of their townships and their regional organisation. They are communicators, authorities, representatives, health promoters, leaders, organisers, etc. Women in the struggle face greater and more serious risks than other women, such as being threatened with trafficking and rape.

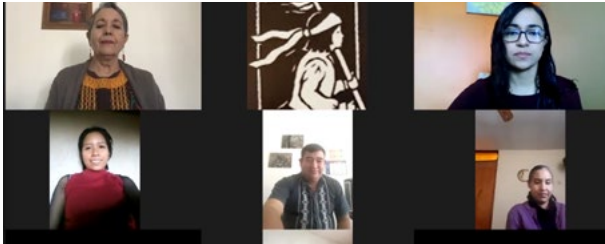
The imposition of the PIM has brought defamation against the communities' defenders; division among the communities; criminalisation and imprisonment; torture; closure of community radio stations; threats of kidnapping, trafficking and murder; and removal of protests and strikes using state and federal public forces, the army and the national guard.

The most painful moment for the peoples' front was the murder of our companion Samir Flores Soberanes on 20 February 2019, three days before President López Obrador held a citizens' consultation which violated the rights of indigenous communities to make decisions about our own territory. This process opened the fate of our communities to consultation with populations and cities which are neither affected by nor informed about the project. As a result, the 'no' vote won in the affected communities, whereas the 'yes' vote won in the cities which had been offered lower electricity prices if the project were finalised.

The health crisis caused by COVID-19 in March 2020 interrupted the European tour which a delegation from the Peoples' Front was participating in; it had aimed to visit more than 20 organisations in Spain and Italy, and PBI had also coordinated meetings with a range of social actors and MEPs. As an alternative to continue our international advocacy, PBI organised a virtual European tour in November and December 2020, to raise the case with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the home countries of the companies involved in the PIM.

The physical and political accompaniment offered by PBI helped generate better protective conditions, although threats and risks against the Peoples' Front have not ceased.

## Statements on the work of three organisations accompanied during COVID-19



### Sierra Madre Alliance (Alianza Sierra Madre, A.C., ASMAC)

Accompaniment to communities was made more complicated because attention from government offices was suspended or limited, and physical activities in the field and the office were limited to protect the health of communities and the ASMAC team.

In regard to the cases which we are accompanying through litigation in tribunals, hearings were suspended for some time due to the pandemic. In addition, the flow of paperwork through government bodies was slowed by reduced staff numbers. Our planned workshops were suspended to avoid people meeting, and we modified our calendar of activities. Our concerns increased, however, because the current situation increases the vulnerability of indigenous communities, where there is no access to health systems should people become sick. We worked from our homes using digital platforms, thus caring for and protecting our team, and we will make a staggered return to the ASMAC office.



### Saltillo Migrant Shelter (Casa del Migrante Saltillo, CMS)

During the pandemic, the Saltillo Migrant Shelter was closed to new arrivals for a period. However, we attended to more than 3,800 people outside of the shelter while the indoor spaces were modified for the new context, and a range of activities were held indoors for those already registered.

### 'Tlachinollan' Human Rights Centre of the Montaña (Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña 'Tlachinollan')

The pandemic takes one more toll on the people of the Montaña region of Guerrero, an area which already suffers extreme poverty and marginalisation. The crisis revealed the collapse of the region's health system, as well as the Mexican State's inability to address the pandemic's economic implications. The migration of entire families to agricultural areas in Mexico's north doubled, risking the health of those migrants. The region has seen many deaths which, because of the area's remoteness from institutions, are not reflected in the official statistics. In a region as isolated as this, it is impossible to maintain contact with communities from a distance. For the Tlachinollan team, it has been a challenge to find ways to protect – as much as possible – our health and that of the people we accompany, while at the same time continuing with our activities.

## Closed borders: The impact of COVID-19 on migrants and asylum seekers

Written by Lena Weber,  
PBI-Mexico Advocacy Coordinator

At the beginning of March 2020, I travelled to Texas and Washington D.C. with Javier Martínez, lawyer and legal coordinator of the Saltillo Migrant Shelter (Casa del Migrante Saltillo, CMS), a refuge for migrants in Coahuila, Mexico, which has offered humanitarian assistance and legal and psychosocial support to migrants and asylum seekers since 2002. Our aim was to hold meetings with civil society organisations and authorities with the aim of strengthening the shelter's support network; providing information on the human rights violations against migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico and on its border with the United States – the most crossed border in the world – as well as calling attention to the risks facing those who defend

these rights. We aimed to create pressure so that both governments would comply with international human rights norms and with their responsibility to guarantee the security and protection of migrants, asylum seekers and HRDs.

Because of the risks facing the CMS, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted the shelter precautionary measures in 2009, and it has been accompanied by Peace Brigades International since 2014. The shelter habitually faces threats, attacks and harassment from organised criminal groups, gangs, security forces, xenophobic individuals and public officials. According to a 2019 report<sup>2</sup>, the most common risks and threats for those who defend the rights

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/frontline\\_defenders\\_mexico\\_english\\_v2.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/frontline_defenders_mexico_english_v2.pdf)

of migrants are detention, deportation, criminalisation, defamation, surveillance and intimidation against shelters and community centres, and stigmatisation. In that same report, Front Line Defenders, the 'All Rights for All' Network (Red 'Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos', RedTDT) and the Program for Migration Issues (Programa de Asuntos Migratorios, PRAMI) call for the recognition of the historic work of organisations like CMS, not only in protecting the rights of migrants, but also for creating networks of community support that strengthen inclusion and respect for diversity.

The difficulties facing migrants, asylum seekers and HRDs are largely

## COVID-19

PBI Mexico normally organises at least two advocacy tours each year, where Mexican HRDs travel to Europe and North America. Our first tour of 2020 began like many others, with a tight three-week schedule in the US and Canada. The day we boarded the plane from Mexico, my housemate sent a message telling me that the first case of COVID-19 – still an abstract threat – had been reported in Mexico City. However, as the days passed, the spread of COVID-19 increased throughout the region and the world, and public and private spaces were increasingly effected. Every day, there were fewer people in the streets. The infections reported in the DC area increased, Congress emptied out, and, by the end of the week, together with Pat David (PBI's Advocacy Director in DC), we were holding meetings in corridors, outside senators' offices and by telephone, disinfecting our hands every few minutes and listening to news on how borders across the world were closing one by one.

The border between Mexico and the United States remained open for the time being. We didn't imagine that it would stay that way for a few privileged individuals, but would close completely for those who most needed to cross.<sup>6</sup> In the uncertainty of the moment, we decided that the safest thing was to cancel our flights to Canada, scheduled for the following day, and put ourselves into quarantine – cases had been reported in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, where we had held meetings over the last five days.

It was patently clear that people in transit would be enormously affected by COVID-19. Under the MPP program, tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers, including pregnant women, were returned to Mexico to await their hearings in some of the region's most dangerous cities. Many slept in the street or informal encampments with poor sanitary conditions.<sup>7</sup> In Mexico as well as the United States, migrants and asylum seekers were held in overcrowded detention centres.<sup>8</sup> Beyond the risk of infection, issues such as the lack of access to healthcare services<sup>9</sup>, the closure of border businesses and activities, the increasing militarisation of the region as a whole<sup>10</sup> and the unprecedented hurricanes caused by climate change which tormented Central America<sup>11</sup> all disproportionately affected migrants and asylum seekers.<sup>12</sup>

6 <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/covid-19-and-remain-mexico-migrant-protection-protocols-policy>

7 <https://www.wola.org/es/2019/11/solicitantes-asilo-quedate-en-mexico/>

8 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-immigration-idUSKCN1TO0DF>

9 <https://ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25730&LangID=S>

10 <https://theconversation.com/la-militarizacion-en-america-latina-en-tiempo-de-covid-19-154781>

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/12/04/espanol/america-latina/huracan-guatemala.html>

12 <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/Pandemia-de-Covid-19-incrementa-el-flujo-migratorio-hacia-Mexico-Encinas-20201208-0071.html>

due to policies which favour human rights violations, such as Mexico's establishment of the National Guard (Guardia Nacional)<sup>3</sup> and the widely condemned, so-called 'Migrant Protection Protocols' (MPP – also known as 'Remain in Mexico')<sup>4</sup>, as well as the use of xenophobic narratives and hate speech. On the border and in the US, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol agents regularly violate the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.<sup>5</sup>

3 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/mexicos-national-guard-breaking-vow-respect-human-rights/>

4 <https://www.wola.org/es/2019/11/solicitantes-asilo-quedate-en-mexico/>

5 <https://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrants-rights/ice-and-border-patrol-abuses>

Advocacy tour with Saltillo Migrant House,  
March 2020 ©PBI México



However, while authorities took measures throughout the pandemic which placed these groups at ever-greater risks, the migrants, asylum seekers and civil-society groups joined forces to rise up against the injustices and take steps to prevent the virus's spread while they organised themselves to give and receive the support they needed. The CMS, for example, allowed no new guests to enter, but continued to attend to thousands of people at the shelter's doors, modifying their activities and sharing food, legal support and other programs. Unfortunately, CMS founder Father Pedro Pantoja Arreola died prematurely as a result of COVID-19 in December 2020.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the pandemic, the Mexican and US governments must adhere to international standards and comply with their responsibility to guarantee the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and HRDs. PBI Mexico applauds the announcement that migrants in Mexico will receive vaccinations<sup>14</sup>, but we remain deeply concerned by the way that COVID-19 has worsened the risks and the wellbeing of these three groups. The tragic massacre of 19 migrants near the US border on 22 January 2021<sup>15</sup> is not an isolated incident, but rather the manifestation of historic and current corruption, collusion between authorities and organised criminal groups, and inhumane migration policies, combined with a legacy of environmental destruction and social and economic exploitation that forces individuals and families into migration across the region. The murdered migrants were primarily young people from Comitancillo, Guatemala, where they left their loved ones behind to be able to provide themselves and their families with a better life.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, PBI continues to receive information from HRDs working with migrants of incidents of surveillance, harassment, threats and lack of support from the authorities in regard to COVID-19. PBI maintains its solidarity with these communities and HRDs, and will continue to monitor their security, while simultaneously insisting that the authorities take urgent measures to guarantee that their human rights are respected.

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13 <https://www.milenio.com/estados/coronavirus-coahuila-muere-padre-pedro-pantoja-saltillo>

14 <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2021/02/22/personas-migrantes-en-mexico-tambien-recibiran-dosis-contra-covid-19-ssa/>

15 <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/guatemalan-forced-migrants-massacred-by-police-and-organized-crime-in-mexico>

16 <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/guatemalan-forced-migrants-massacred-by-police-and-organized-crime-in-mexico>

## The European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) visits the US–Mexico border

In February 2020, a DROI delegation<sup>17</sup>, visited Mexico's northern border at Ciudad Juárez–El Paso, with the aim of seeing first-hand the situation of people seeking international protection. This field visit was proposed as a follow-up to the resolution on the US–Mexico border situation which was approved by European Parliament in July 2019<sup>18</sup>. In that resolution, the parliament called on the Mexican government 'to comply with international standards and human rights law when addressing migration'. It also denounced the 'appalling conditions' in US immigration detention facilities, which 'lack adequate healthcare, decent food and proper sanitation'. The delegation witnessed these conditions for itself and warned that asylum seekers were detained in centres that resembled prisons and treated as if they were criminals.

The text of the European Parliament's resolution also 'pays tribute to' civil-society organisations 'that have been ensuring that migrants enjoy the most basic of rights, such as the rights to water, food, health, adequate shelter and other such assistance, on both sides of the border and throughout the region'. At the same time, the resolution 'reiterates its call for the non-criminalisation of humanitarian assistance'. The MEPs on the mission expressed their concern for the continued harassment against HRDs, and shared this concern with political representatives. PBI urged the visit to include meetings with civil-society organisations and key actors in the migration space, such as municipal- and state-level authorities in Chihuahua.

PBI salutes these actions and urges European Parliament to seek creative ways to maintain these connections with relevant local actors, HRDs and human rights organisations, in this period marked by digital connection and social distancing. PBI Mexico also calls for the DROI to continue monitoring the situation of migrants in Mexico, given this group's especial vulnerability.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/es/press-room/20200303IPR73865/first-visit-to-the-us-mexico-border-by-parliament-s-subcommittee-on-human-rights>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0005\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0005_EN.html)



*The European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights visits the US Mexico border, February 2020*

## Sergi Sendra, Project Committee Continuing to open spaces for peace

There is no doubt that 2020 has been an especially difficult year for everyone. Everything that has unfolded as a result of the health crisis caused by COVID-19 has made us question many aspects of our lives and has highlighted the need to take measures, as we've never had to do before, to address the current context.

As a member of PBI Mexico and its Project Committee, you become aware of the risks and emergencies which can occur in terms of human rights in Mexico, aware of the importance of having action plans to address the different scenarios which might arise. But I never thought that this would happen as it has, and within a global pandemic. Making the decision to temporarily close the field teams was the most difficult one I have been faced with in my years with PBI, and it was the year's biggest challenge.

Managing the entirety of the process made clear the need to have a strong, cohesive structure. It took days of analysis; of great uncertainty; of having to measure, using the information shared through the media, the impacts that might arise for the volunteers in the field and the consequences which may come to pass in Mexico – in a situation which none of us had experienced before.

It was imperative, because of the nature and work of PBI, that all of its entities were represented at all times. Even with horizontality as one of the organisation's principles, and decision-making made by consensus, that doesn't mean that all of us bear the same level of responsibility: the Project Committee has the responsibility of guaranteeing the wellbeing of every individual who is part of the project and its future.

As we observed the situation that was arising because of the health emergency and waited for the decisions of various countries as they reacted to the circumstances (closing borders, limiting movement, healthcare, etc.), it became clear that a temporary closure of the field teams was the action that caused the least harm to the volunteers, while also guaranteeing them the time to return to their home countries if that was their decision. With that aim, a working group was formed to provide follow-up to the different actions being taken and to monitor them based on a set of indicators which were revised weekly.

Because of the way the situation developed and was shared in various spaces within the project, there was a certain discomfort because of the decision to close the teams. The need to understand the position of all areas of the project, to come to a decision that risked neither individuals nor PBI Mexico as a whole, was not easy. Responding to each person's individual needs, but also attending to the project's collective needs, demanded significant effort – and, of course, great empathy.

It is important that we value, more than ever, the work and energy of all the people involved in PBI Mexico. With everything that occurred, we were able to develop new ways to continue to accompany our human rights defenders, even with physical distancing, as even in a pandemic, that work never ends and is even more valuable than it ever was. Without a doubt, 2020 will be a year that every person will remember. As for the project, it has also marked a turning point where we can make adjustments to establish some changes in the project structure and continue to open spaces for peace – always.

## Víctor Alfonso Avila García, Northern Team

### The temporary closure of PBI Mexico's Northern Team during the pandemic

Chiara and I arrived in Chihuahua on 25 January 2020. The last days of January and all of February were very cold. My hands wouldn't warm up even when I was jogging with my teammate, Pauline, in the park just half a street away from the PBI house/office. Every morning at breakfast, Chiara listened to news bulletins from her country. Day after day, those voices commented, with ever-growing seriousness and intensity, on just one subject: a virus that was rapidly spreading, alerting authorities and putting pressure on countries' health systems with death tolls even higher than those in my home country (Colombia). 'Sometimes strange things happen in China and Europe,' I thought, without perceiving any connection between those strange things and my immediate future.

Mexico had a patient zero. Colombia had a patient zero. Chiara was looking more worried, because the situation got out of control where her loved ones were, in the north of Italy. Voice messages arrived from her doctor friend, saying they had had to prioritise the lives of some patients over others in the hospital where she worked. Chiara's boyfriend could no longer come to Mexico – his trip was cancelled by the restrictions that were being considered worldwide; her mother and father had to remain shut in their house.

There were dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of cases on that side of the world, and the situation started to take on a catastrophic

tinge here as well.

PBI created a taskforce to prepare a project-wide response to the pandemic and provide ongoing monitoring of new developments. Pauline, who was involved in the calls, came to us with difficult but necessary questions: Did we prefer to return to our home countries? Could we put up with not seeing our friends in Chihuahua and remaining in quarantine for an indeterminate amount of time? Could we design a work plan that would help us meet the project's goals, and our own, during lockdown?

In the south, some volunteers decided to leave the field team. In the north, we chose to stay together, and even held a psychosocial care workshop which we weren't able to finish: the taskforce put through an urgent call because it had been decided to immediately evacuate the field teams. Those of us from Colombia could stay in Mexico, given the imminent closure of our air borders. First I said goodbye to Chiara, as we each believed we'd see the other again. Then Pauline. And finally, Eder and Lili.

After almost a year, PBI Mexico is now preparing to reopen the house/office of Northern Team with a new field team, to continue accompanying HRDs into a very uncertain context.

## Benjamin Dorrington, Southern Team

### The last eight months of physical presence with PBI Mexico's Southern Team

I arrived in Oaxaca in August 2019, to support the team and offer security and protection to human rights defenders.

When I arrived, the team was in a process of reconstruction after the departure of some volunteers and the arrival of others. In the next eight months, we consolidated relationships with the human rights organisations in Oaxaca and established new ones with HRDs in the state of Puebla and on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

All members of the team, despite our personal differences, had the same objective: to strengthen the Southern Team and ensure the security and protection of the people we accompany. The work rhythm was quite intense, and my learning process began immediately. During the first weeks in the field, a teammate and I accompanied some HRDs on the isthmus to an information meeting about wind-farm projects. My teammate, who had been in the project longer than me, also had a lot more confidence and acted with greater autonomy

in her role as a PBI field volunteer. At that moment, I thought, 'I'm never going to be able to do everything she is doing.'

However, during my last month in the Southern Team – after eight months in the field, more than 15 meetings with authorities in Oaxaca and Guerrero, and reading and analysing daily news updates on the territory we worked in – I did feel much more comfortable during another accompaniment with the very same HRDs as we travelled around the isthmus.

I had no idea it was going to be my last accompaniment. Within a week, COVID-19 terminated the Southern Team's work.

Thinking back on my experience in PBI, I feel a mix of emotions: some sadness for the team's closure because of COVID-19, but at the same time a large amount of gratitude for having had the opportunity to build relationships with the HRDs we accompany and to develop a protective practice that was consistent and of great importance.



## To the Mexican government:

- Implement the recommendations of the diagnostic study of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico (OHCHR) on the functioning of the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (Mecanismo de Protección para Defensores de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas).<sup>19</sup>
- Apply a human rights focus to any financial action or plan for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, guaranteeing the safety and protection of HRDs and their fundamental role in those plans.<sup>20</sup>
- Guarantee access to justice and due penalties for the material and intellectual authors in cases where HRDs and journalists have been murdered, or have faced threats or criminalisation for pursuing their legitimate work.
- Revise the laws and policies which restrict the freedoms of association, expression and assembly at a state and federal level, and avoid the criminalisation of HRDs.
- Design effective cooperation schemes between the federation, states and municipalities to allow the elaboration of protection responses that are consistent, coordinated, rapid and holistic, ensuring that the protection measures assigned are based on an accurate risk assessment which accounts for an individual's gender and intersectional identities.
- Refrain from issuing or disseminating stigmatising or intimidating messages about HRDs and journalists, and roundly condemn them when they circulate.<sup>21</sup>
- Strengthen the external and internal supervision mechanisms of the National Guard (Guardia Nacional) to ensure its work is conducted in accordance with national and international human rights standards. Urgently expand and implement appropriate training in human rights and, in particular, in interactions with vulnerable populations such as migrants. To ensure the civilian character of these forces, decouple the army's public security corps from the National Guard.
- Regarding migrants, ensure they experience behaviour and treatment in line with their human rights and international laws on the protection of refugees, including preserving family units and not returning those at risk or facing persecution to their countries of origin. Ensure that HRDs working with migrants can complete their work within a national legislative framework that does not criminalise or obstruct their right to defend the rights of others, nor obstruct their access to migrants in shelters or state migrant holding centres. Take proactive measures to halt xenophobic narratives and discourses.
- Promote differentiated strategies for protection, incorporating analyses based on gender and intersectionality, for women HRDs and other vulnerable HRD groups, such as defenders of land, territory and the environment.
- Guarantee timely fulfilment, in accordance with international law, of the right to free, prior, informed and culturally appropriate consultation and consent for indigenous peoples and peasant communities, through effective consultation mechanisms enacted prior to the design and granting of concessions for economic development projects. Respect indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, in particular when it concerns the economic development of their territories as set out in Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution.
- Fully implement the General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons, Disappearances Committed by Individuals and the National Missing Persons System (Ley General en materia de desaparición forzada de personas, desaparición cometida por particulares y del sistema nacional de búsqueda de personas). Ensure that HRDs who accompany collectives of relatives of disappeared people, and the collectives themselves, can carry out their work without being threatened. Avoid legal and policy reforms that can weaken this law.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>22</sup>

## To the international community:

- Offer continual recognition to the work undertaken by HRDs, contributing to the construction of a narrative which backs their indispensable labour in democratic societies.
- Generate more-inclusive spaces which foster the active participation of HRDs. Provide stronger guarantees for the presence of HRDs focused on the environment, the rights of indigenous peoples, and land and territory in spaces for debate and decision-making that address global challenges such as climate change.
- Contribute to the fight against impunity, as a principal cause that favours the repetition of violations. Ensure access to independent, fair and impartial justice for victims of human rights violations. Combat the incremental growth of laws which limit or nullify the right to defend human rights.
- Foster the protection of those who defend human rights, from a differential and holistic focus which pays particular attention to the specific protection needs of women HRDs and those working on land and territory or communities. Focus efforts on the implementation of preventative measures.
- Ensure that the presence of foreign investments and international companies does not foment and engender subsequent abuses and violations of human rights, guaranteeing their compliance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights of the United Nations and international human rights law.

<sup>19</sup> <https://bit.ly/2xcbU47>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.cejil.org/sites/default/files/resumen\\_ejecutivo\\_es.pdf](https://www.cejil.org/sites/default/files/resumen_ejecutivo_es.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.cejil.org/sites/default/files/resumen\\_ejecutivo\\_es.pdf](https://www.cejil.org/sites/default/files/resumen_ejecutivo_es.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://bit.ly/2FJXatK>

# PBI Mexico's finances in 2020

It would have been impossible to predict a year as unusual as 2020. Because of the pandemic, both of PBI's volunteer teams had to temporarily leave Mexico, although many activities were maintained through digital means and the commitment of staff and volunteers, several of whom kept up PBI's activities via remote work from their home countries. Thankfully, the project's structure was not impacted (apart from changes already underway) as several sources of funding had already been guaranteed for the year. This allowed us to adapt the rhythms and forms of our work to respond to the new realities.

Many physical activities were cancelled, which saved us the associated costs. This was the case for the advocacy tours with human rights defenders, training new project volunteers and the strategic meetings normally held biannually in Mexico. By transferring these activities into virtual forums and cancelling national and international travel, PBI Mexico's costs dropped approximately 35% in 2020.

As some of those activities were tied to specific funding, the distribution of some funding sources was affected. Accordingly, some activities were modified and others were postponed. In other cases, the funding allocation was transferred straight to 2021's budget.

It is important to note, as we compare the figures from 2020 with those in previous Annual Reports, that the rubric "donations and payments in kind" no longer appears because of an internal change in PBI Mexico's accounting system. This was related to staff contracts that were financed directly by external bodies and donors. Without this item, we see another decrease in official costs and expenses of 8%.

Modifications of this magnitude would not have been possible without PBI Mexico's donors and funders reacting so positively

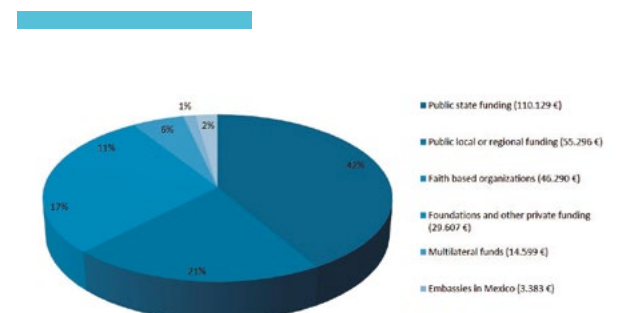
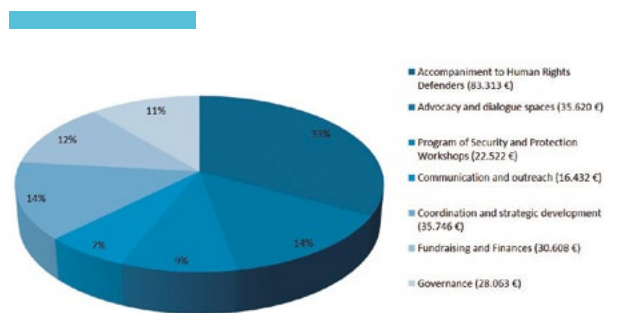
to the effects of the pandemic, and showing the flexibility needed to allow variations in our funding agreements. We are grateful for this because it allowed us to adapt, rather than reducing our activities even further or losing funding. We were thus able to maintain our support and protection for Mexican human rights organisations and defenders.

As was set out in 2019 in the strategic plans for PBI Mexico's restructure, our fundraising was strengthened with the creation of a new role of Fundraising Coordinator. This position, supported by the General Coordinator and the Finance Coordinator, now holds the central role in PBI Mexico's fundraising processes.

In the tables on this page, we can see that, proportionally, the structure of PBI Mexico's funding base had no major changes in 2020, and the decrease in public funds is largely explained by the rubric change mentioned above. We would also like to highlight the return of direct funding from embassies located in Mexico, associated with the completion of specific projects.

PBI's primary challenges in terms of fundraising continue to be related to seeking untied core funding, as well as sources of multiyear funding. We believe that the human rights sector will be affected by the probable financial crisis, and that our fundraising efforts, together with support from our donors, will need to respond in a way that seeks medium-term stability for the project.

The economic impacts felt in 2020, and the corresponding reduction in costs and physical activities throughout the year, resulted in a budget surplus of almost 5%. This outcome allows us to boost PBI Mexico's reserves and give us a margin of protection for the difficult years which will surely come.



The financial data in this report are provisional and have yet to be audited. All income and expenditure are presented in euros.

PBI Mexico thanks all its donors for their support, which has allowed us to continue our work and activities during 2020.

**Peace Brigades International (PBI)** is a non-governmental organization with 40 years of experience in international accompaniment, with presence in Mexico since 2000. PBI's goal is to protect the political space for people and organizations that promote human rights in a non-violent manner, and who suffer repression for their legitimate work.

**PBI** only works at the request of local organizations and does not replace efforts by Mexican human rights defenders to promote respect for human rights. Rather, it merely seeks to support their initiatives by standing next to them.

**PBI** regularly visits conflict areas, distributes information, and dialogues with civil and military authorities, as well as with human rights organizations and other civil society actors in Mexico. To call international attention to the situation in Mexican, and to help create the necessary conditions for human rights defenders to continue with their work, **PBI** also maintains dialogue with the international community and international organizations such as the United Nations, disseminates information, and generates support from abroad in order to ensure the safety of Mexican defenders.

More information about PBI's work in Mexico can be found at:

[www.pbi-mexico.org](http://www.pbi-mexico.org)

[comunicacion@pbi-mexico.org](mailto:comunicacion@pbi-mexico.org)



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