



# Four perspectives on resilience in Guatemala

---

BY OTTO ARGUETA AND ARNOLDO GÁLVEZ



After 18 years since the signing of the peace accords, Guatemala still faces enormous challenges on the road to the consolidation of peace. This is due, principally, to ongoing conflicts that can turn violent given that the State does not possess the institutional mechanisms transform them peacefully.

However, Guatemala is a resilient society that has developed a variety of nonviolent capacities to transform conflicts. Recognizing this capacity is one of the principal contributions of the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme: it reveals that society itself is capable of developing mechanisms to overcome and transform problems.

This section of the journal presents a series of conversations with members of the national group on the contribution of a resilience approach and the perspectives for transformation that the group has identified over the months. The opinions and outlooks transcribed below reflect the richness and diversity of a group made up of individuals from different social sectors who discovered, in the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme, a space to meet and to shorten the distances that separate them.

After an exploratory and consultation phase to determine the principle social problems that Guatemala's population faces with resilience, the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme in Guatemala began a second phase: the implementation of a participatory action research (PAR) process that sought to open up a multi-sectoral political space to analyze in more depth the capacities of resilience of Guatemalan society and to develop proposals to transform society and to overcome the problems identified in the consultation phase. To that end, a national-level group was set up with representatives of the State and civil society, as well as experts in the field.

The national group appointed two working groups, one to look into socio-environmental conflicts and a second to explore the problems related to insecurity and violence. After eight months of frequent meetings and the commitment of the participants, various follow-up proposals were put together based on the capacities for resilience for conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

One of the characteristics of the PAR methodology is its flexibility and capacity to adapt. The methodology invites the participants to become owners of the process and to themselves lead it in order to generate understanding and proposals for social change. This flexibility became evident in the Resilience and Peacebuilding process, when members of the groups decided to include in their agenda for analysis and action proposals the institutional crisis that emerged from the corruption scandals and subsequent street protests that led to the resignations and jailing of the President and Vice President of the Republic.<sup>1</sup>

This section of the journal presents a series of conversations with members of the national group on the contribution of a resilience approach and the perspectives for transformation that the group has identified over the months. The opinions and outlooks transcribed below reflect the richness and diversity of a group made up of individuals from different social sectors who discovered, in the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme, a space to meet and to shorten the distances that separate them.

---

1. On 16 April 2015, the office of the Public Prosecutor and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) presented a wide-ranging investigation on the existence of a web of corruption within the government of Guatemala. It is estimated that the web, called "La Línea", embezzled an average of some 2.5 million quetzals a week by charging up to 30% of the value of imports to importers given its control of the system of customs houses. The investigations led to the arrest of 19 people, from low-level bureaucrats up to high level officials such as the Superintendent of the Revenue Office (Superintendencia de Administración Tributaria) and the Private Secretary of the Vice President, Roxana Baldetti. The Public Prosecutor and the CICIG also announced the beginning of an investigation into the businesses that benefited from the payment of bribes to this corruption web.

The national crisis deepened after the Public Prosecutor and the CICIG presented on 20 May a second investigation on corruption in the government. This time the authorities arrested 17 individuals linked to a corruption web in the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security (IGSS), that included the president of the Bank of Guatemala, the president and members of the board of directors of IGSS and other high level officials. This web enabled a contract with a pharmaceutical firm for dialysis treatment at an approximate cost of 116 million quetzals. The company did not fill the legal requirements and the death of 30 people are associated with the services the company provided.

As a consequence of all this, massive street protests took place, all of them peaceful, the biggest of which brought together close to one hundred thousand people in the central plaza of Guatemala City. These social protests and the investigations carried out by the Public Prosecutor and CICIG, that proved the direct link between the highest officials in the executive branch and the web of embezzlers in the customs houses, led to the resignation of the president and the vice-president of the Republic, who now are in prison awaiting trial.



## Ivanova Ancheta

Lawyer in sustainable management and former Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Sustainable Development.

**What has been the main contribution of the resilience approach to a better understanding of the problems the country faces? At the same time, how does this approach contribute to the search for solutions?**

Resilience is the human capacity to convert an adversity into an opportunity: an opportunity for change, an opportunity to search for circumstances that will leave a crisis behind or overcome an adversity. In this respect, resilience in Guatemala is a very important factor: because we have developed many capacities, even though we are weighed down by the worst in-

stances of development in Central America and one of the worst in the world, there is very much poverty, extreme poverty, and that affects many other problems we have in the country, such as violence and the lack of opportunities. And this is something that we live daily.

That is why the concept of resilience is so important to understand ourselves, given that a good part of the population really practices resilience in order to survive and overcome all these adversities. However, the very lack of education has held back the possibilities of making use of this capacity to create better results.

**Can we thus say that Guatemala is a resilient society?**

Yes, if we weren't resilient we would be even worse off as a society.

**How do you visualize this resilient Guatemala? What are its characteristics?**

I visualize it as everyday history, where people have to face adverse circumstances and overcome them. For example, a mother who is head of household, widow, with many children, who has to take care of her house and seeks resources to do so. I believe we are very resilient and there are many very good examples of resilient individuals.



### **In the public sphere, how is resilience expressed?**

There are very many public officials who hold up the government and the State, if it weren't for them the State would no longer exist. And these people are resilient, they have developed certain capacities to overcome adverse situations that occur due to the lack of strong institutions, to the politicization of institutions, to corruption, etc.

### **Can we refer to a resilient State?**

I believe that what is resilient, within the State, are some officials that are frequently technical and remain at their posts. They transcend changes in government or are civil servants and help to carry on the public's business.

I don't think that the structure of the State or the system generates resilience, on the contrary, I believe that the system has brought about corruption. But there are very many people in the government who have been resilient and have had opportunities to improve certain circumstances or at least to maintain them.

For example, there are many cases of officials who enter gov-

ernment to benefit themselves personally, to enrich themselves. That happens, generally, in the strictly political appointments. But there are other public officials who guarantee that the institutions don't end up embezzled or corrupted totally.

### **Are we then talking about individuals whose resilience is preventing the collapse of the State?**

They say that the State has failed and maybe that's true, but it would much worse if there weren't that swathe of people who are good, who do have a concept of citizenship, who have been resilient and have converted adversities into opportunities.

In your experience in public administration, which are the principle challenges that must be faced in terms of resilience?

One of our basic problems is precisely the lack of a citizen consciousness. A collective conscience does not exist from which a will might emerge to want to improve the country. That interest is beginning to show but it must be deepened, because we all have something to give, we all have something to contribute in whatever way of life we find ourselves and we cannot continue to be indifferent to our reality.

### **The recent citizen protests against corruption, could they mark the end of that indifference?**

I believe they are one of the first symptoms of a feeling of impotence, but they don't yet have a clear bearing. In Guatemala we are at present suffering from intellectual and spiritual poverty. There is no content. If you look at the newspapers, you read about value judgements, accusations, there is no underlying intellectual or philosophical bedrock that might provide a bearing and that reflects on the absence of leaders.

### **What aspects, which are already resilient, will have to be strengthened in the public sector?**

A serious reform of the system must be undertaken and I think it should begin in the Congress: on the country's agenda are pending a reform of the civil service law, if we don't reform that the State will always be subject to turmoil.



## Carlos Arenas

Member of an organization called Relatives and Friends Against Crime and Kidnapping (Familiares y Amigos Contra la Delincuencia y el Secuestro, FADS).

### **In your experience, what has been the principal contribution of the resilience approach to the analysis of the problems that Guatemala faces currently?**

In principle, what we need is to learn to communicate and afterwards to build a sense of belonging to the country, accepting diversity and differences, and that is why this space makes me enthusiastic. In fact, Guatemala is a country with strong traumas and for that reason we must learn to overcome together that traumatic part of our history, by means of a process of communication in which we accept ourselves under our ways of thinking but also, at

the same time, with an interest in building for the common good and for the future generations.

I believe that by opening up space for communication and participation we will discover the different ways of thinking and different social groups and thereby achieve a new meeting of the Guatemala we all look forward to.

### **How would you describe that “resilient Guatemala? How do you imagine that “Guatemala that we all look forward to”?**

A resilient Guatemala is a Guatemala that shares common country goals. A Guatemala where, regardless of the differences, we can accept each other and com-

municate. A resilient Guatemala is that which assigns worth to the human being, a country that can progress because it values human beings above and beyond where its inhabitants are located in geographic, economic or ideological terms.

### **What, therefore, are the principal challenges and problems that we face to achieve that “resilient Guatemala”?**

We need to strengthen our resolve to transform ways of thinking, ways of doing, but I would think fundamentally that the opportunity is to be found in education. Education will allow us to build models based on a culture of



Protest against corruption in Guatemala City, 2015  
Photo: Carlos Sebastián for Nómada.gt  
Licensed under Creative Commons

prevention, a culture of building jointly and putting the human being first.

**What aspects of this society already are resilient, already are positive, and how should we come together to strengthen them?**

The current crisis, born out of the corruption scandals in the government, has had a strong impact on the citizenry and the citizenry has responded demanding justice. There we might find a beginning of resilience that we

must make the most of, as well as of the emergence of all those other groupings of organized society from a variety of origins, of different ideologies, and even of diverse economic status, that are seeking solutions by identifying a problem that is shared by all. This can be built upon to achieve a common vision and will to transform.

I am speaking, in other words, about breaking down paradigms, which is very difficult in our culture, but I think that very important contributions are being made.

There will be need probably to socialize these initiatives among other groups of diverse orientation, that are participating – and maybe not – or that have not communicated sufficiently. In this respect, the group of the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme, in which we are participating, is very valuable given its plural nature; it is necessary to share our vision with these other groups, contribute to the building of a common vision for the country, and thereby prevent divisionism.





## María del Carmen Aceña

Associate researcher at the Centre for National Economic Research (CIEN).  
From 2004 to 2008 she was Minister of Education.

### **What has been the main contribution of the perspective of resilience in achieving a better understanding of the problems that face the country and the search for solutions?**

A good aspect has been the possibility for diverse sectors to sit around a table and acquire knowledge. The concept allows us to understand how we have reacted and how that positive reaction can be applied in our daily lives. Then to define those large issues we have been tackling as a group, socio-environmental conflicts and citizen security; I believe it allows us to

discuss the big national issues without any political banner or preconceived concept. That is positive and that is why people of all sectors of society have been brought together, people with different ways of thinking. I believe the methodology is very good because it has allowed all those diverse ways of thinking to express themselves and has enabled a joint analysis on those positive capacities in society required to build the future.

### **What is a resilient Guatemala like?**

I believe there are two Guatemalas, the Guatemala that is

over 30 years of age, and the one under 30. The Guatemala older than 30 is very conservative, it does not discuss, it accepts. While in the other, those below 30, I see people who are much more dynamic, who protest peacefully, who are active in social networks, that express themselves in different forms. I believe that we are witnessing there a variety of peaceful forms that aim to resolve our problems. What we have seen in these four months is a lot of participation, a desire to lay out and share our internal pain and not keep it penned up inside, and to seek solutions. The combination of



that youth with the experience of those over 30 constitutes, I believe, the great opportunity to move Guatemala forward.

**You have experience in both the public sector as well as the private. How can resilience be understood from the perspective of those two sectors in particular?**

The private sector is a group that transcends governments and the way they have tried to face adversities has been to group together. They have set up barriers so as to not be attacked, and they participate very little. Now they are much more conservative, much less public. That is the way they have acted to defend themselves from attacks. When governments wear out, they start to blame the private sector, especially certain families with many resources, resources which they have earned themselves. For that reason, words like “oligarchy” do much damage because we are talking about a private sector that really is committed to Guatemala. Thus, what we need are more bridges of communication. The people who can and want to make changes are fragmented.

**Does the State of Guatemala have resilience capacities?**

I find resilience capacities in career civil servants. I have seen peaceful resistance in officials who are honest and take a stand against corrupt governments. But that does not improve the condition of the country.

One can analyze resilience well in the case of an event that one cannot administer, for example, the death of someone dear, where capacities are generated. But in the face of corruption I believe people end up ill and that is terrible for a society, because it becomes ill but withstands, resists. The very technical public servants might resign but if they do, what are they going to do for a living?

Thus, what has happened in Guatemala in the last four months means we have a great opportunity to clean up illnesses of this kind, it is the great opportunity we have to change systems. Four years ago people remained silent and that was their form of defence, but not today, now honest people get out on the streets and put their problems on the table.

**Do you believe that that change of attitude has to do**

**with the energy and the values of that Guatemala that you have described as “under thirty”?**

Young people are beginning to understand that if they do not achieve a change of system, they have no future. These are young people who are studying to become professionals, who want to innovate, but they have already become aware that in Guatemala there is no future and for that reason they are waking up, they have more and better information and are connected globally. Protests against corruption and impunity brought together an important segment of the population.

**What other problems that Guatemala faces currently require that resilient attitude in society?**

Violence is the main problem. And to fight it we need that our leaders, in fact, lead that fight. In Guatemala, the CICIG commissioner has a 65% approval rating, the Congress has 12% and the president 8 or 7%. I hope that the next government really assumes its leadership role, and that the president be an authentic leader.

National unity has to involve youth. Young people have good ideas, what they need is patience, understanding that changes will not happen from one day to the next. We must support processes, change systems, after thirty years of democracy during which we did not have sufficient controls within the State and this is the moment to reform it.

The success of this moment will depend on how this energy of young people can be channelled in the direction of processes, of changes, so that the country can really change and young people

can have a future. They themselves became aware that there was no future. And what future might that be if I walk out onto the street and I might be killed in a bus? What future is that in which there are no public services? How can I imagine a future in a country where politics are viewed as a mechanism to escape poverty?

**In terms of resilience, what must be strengthened so that Guatemala can take advantage of that opportunity you have identified?**

We must strengthen the political

parties, by making their financing transparent. Before they were financed through business donations and now they are financed with public funds, if not by drug money.

In addition, at a micro level, people need to talk, to act. For example, if my community has a problem, we must talk about it, organize and take action.

If am really outraged about something that is happening in my neighbourhood, I need to join up with someone else who is also outraged and take action.



Protest against corruption in Guatemala City, 2015  
Photo: Carlos Sebastián for Nomada.gi  
Licensed under Creative Commons





Protest against corruption in Guatemala City, 2015  
Photo: Carlos Sebastián for Nómada.gt  
Licensed under Creative Commons





## Sergio Funes

Representative of the Research Centre for Development and Peace and the Association for Comprehensive Rural Development.

### **What has been the main contribution of the perspective of resilience to achieve a better understanding of the problems that face the country?**

I believe that addressing socio-environmental conflict in the country, under the resilience perspective, allows us to identify response capacities in the face of conflicts that have been building up among the more vulnerable populations, in a society, in addition, plagued by inequalities, where there are few opportunities to access justice or the development projects of the State.

People in rural areas have managed to maintain that response capacity in the face of inequalities, and this is a new way of looking at this problem, by analyzing the capacity of the very people to sustain themselves and respond to a very unequal society.

### **How does this perspective contribute to the search for solutions?**

We are evolving with reality, evolving politically with reality. It is comprehensible that in Guatemala there still exist very confrontational attitudes among the social and communal orga-

nizations in the face of conflicts. But it is also true that other more conciliatory positions also exist. There are organizations that are willing to sit around a table and begin to discuss, directly with the State and with the business sectors, those issues that affect the people. This is important, even though it be a position not shared by all. The resilience perspective can contribute to helping us get there because we still operated under the logic of the armed conflict, where positions were irreconcilable. But today there is no internal armed conflict and we do not have any possibility

of achieving control of the State in order to solve the problems faced by the people.

That is why we signed up in this space provided by the Resilience and Peacebuilding programme.

It has been proven that we must seek out intermediate positions to resolve conflicts, and that requires that we change our methods of struggle. Not the objectives, the methods.

In this respect, when we talk about resilience, we not only talk about identifying the capacity that existed in the past to resist the effects of inequalities but today, more than ever, to talk about resilience means the development of capacities to link us up and seek out intermediate positions. If we don't give that "jump in" method, we, as social organizations, are not going to get out of the hole in which we are stuck. Some are suffering even more the effects of sticking to those extreme positions. Even though, in the end, it's not even the organizations that suffer those effects but the communities themselves. It's a sad reality but we must accept that the social organizations have a lot of influ-

ence in the way in which conflicts develop. In that respect, we are very responsible for changing our work methods so that we can, effectively, contribute to the transformation of people's lives.

**Would you identify that as a capacity of resilience? The awareness of your responsibility as a social organization and the need to change your methods in order to achieve change?**

Yes, we are talking in this case about adaptive resilience, not of conditions, neither of objectives but of method. We are adapting. Before, our positions were of force, because we had mechanisms with which to apply force, that is, we responded in the same way. Today we must find other mechanisms, we need new ways to adapt to the new conditions that the system itself is offering us.

**You mentioned that the capacities for resilience have changed over time. How have those changes taken shape within the context of social movements?**

At some moments of the country's history, resistance

was expressed in the hills, in exile, in clandestine activities. We were resilient because we developed capacities to face the circumstances we were living in, defending life, in principle. Then we passed on to another stage: the peace accords. When the General Accord for Human Rights (Acuerdo Global de Derechos Humanos) was signed, the necessary conditions began to take shape that allowed people to come out openly on the political stage. Naturally, methods change, conditions required that we change our methods of struggle. When the last part of the peace accords was signed, we thought we were going to transform the country via elections, within the framework of the rule of law, by organizing, social pressure, and all the mechanisms that democracy allows. However, I think we have not made sufficient use of some of those mechanisms in order to transform reality.

**In the context of resilience, what are the main challenges which social organizations currently face?**

One of the main challenges of social organizations is that



Protest against corruption in Guatemala City, 2015  
Photo: Carlos Sebastián for Nómada.gt  
Licensed under Creative Commons

we might start to talk not only of social organizations but of authentic social movements. As social organizations we must do battle – the biggest of all – and that is a battle against ourselves. If we do not do that we won't be able to build something that is bigger than each one of us, that is, a social movement. And that can only take place if we have information, capacities to analyze conjunctures, advice, etc.

### **What positive actions are being undertaken already but what must be strengthened to move towards a social movement?**

I repeat: information, political analysis, the knowledge of law is most important; as organizations, we sometimes put forth proposals which are not viable. I am convinced that we must con-

tinue to build spaces for negotiation, I believe that in all sectors there exist positions with a will to negotiate, within the State, in civil society, and we might begin with an exercise to address some of these urgent issues. There are some people who never will sit down at a negotiating table and we cannot wait for them forever. You have talked about very traditional organizations from a historical point of view.

### **What do you find that is new in the more recent organized expressions of dissatisfaction, many of which are emerging in recent protests against corruption, and which even though are not identified with any of those movements, are beginning to emerge with much force?**

I believe we must understand

that as historic national organizations, we don't have exclusive rights nor precedence within civil society. Now there are a diversity of organizations with very revolutionary demands, that do not originate necessarily within the revolutionary left, and which are putting forth new issues: the LGBT movement, special capacities, working children, women, indigenous peoples, all with a diversity of positions, etc. Society is diverse and will express itself diversely. What we need to do is to link up all these different positions and provide more support, as I said at the beginning, in areas of design and political and conjunctural analysis, in access to information, legal knowledge, negotiation strategies for the resolution of conflicts. What we need foremost is training, to know when and how, and not the other way round.