



## Cultural interventions through children's literature and arts-based practices in times of disaster: A case study of reading mediators' response to the Mexican earthquakes (September 2017)

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### ABSTRACT

Recent natural disasters have challenged current models of crisis management and intervention, demanding speedy, flexible and emergent social actors to respond at multiple levels. To provide a comprehensive response, top-down models have incorporated the critical role played by citizen-volunteers in assisting communities in distress. However, few post-crisis response models have identified new social actors who can contribute with creative, coordinated, and sustainable solutions. In this article, we present the case study of the 2017 Mexican earthquakes and the post-disaster activities developed by an emergent group of social actors — reading mediators. We argue for the critical role of mediators and their use of children's literature and arts-based practices as essential instruments for community reconstruction. Drawing upon a case study methodology, we share the mediators' post-disaster activities and experiences in four stages: immediate recovery, stabilisation, development and consolidation. We argue that such cultural interventions are essential in assisting communities recover and build resilience and, more importantly, new social actors such as reading mediators need further formal and institutional support. In this sense, *el Protocolo*, the cultural protocol developed in response to the mediators' work, stands as an exemplary model that complements the emergent and distributed actions of reading mediators. As a whole, the Mexican cultural response provides a unique comprehensive approach that could be modeled in other contexts to address the needs of all citizens in vulnerable post-disaster circumstances.

### 1. Introduction

Resilience in post-disaster contexts is defined by the ability of a system, community or society to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the impact of a disaster in a way that preserves and restores essential structures and functions [1]. Protocols and models of intervention have recently turned to the unique contribution that local people and their communities can bring to these processes [2–4]. However, few case studies have fully enacted new ways of responding by engaging local community members in innovative social configurations and action plans.

On September 19, 2017, a devastating earthquake of 7.1 magnitude hit Mexico City, adding to the devastation of an 8.1 magnitude earthquake that had originated off the Pacific Coast affecting Oaxaca, Morelos, Guerrero, Chiapas, Tabasco and Hidalgo on September 7th, 2017 [5]. For Mexicans, these earthquakes brought back vivid memories when, in 1985, an 8.0 magnitude quake caused great loss of life and

destruction of buildings across Mexico City. Communities were taken by surprise but were not unprepared for responding to this crisis. Without waiting for the authorities, people began to dig for survivors under the collapsed buildings, first aid was provided, shelters were set up and donations began to pour in. It took longer for help to reach the more isolated villages but eventually volunteers and donations arrived. Help came in expected ways via firemen and medics, but some of the individuals helping communities came in the form of storytellers, clowns, and musicians who brought arts-based practices to children and families. Amongst them were the *mediadores de lectura* (reading mediators).

Almost straightaway, reading mediators, who had experience working with children's literature and reading practices, turned to their book collections and used them to quickly intervene and offer their services to their immediate affected communities. In light of the overwhelming response from reading mediators across the states affected by the earthquakes, the Secretaría de Cultura (Ministry of Culture) launched a call to all mediators to contribute to the development of a

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cultural intervention that would later be consolidated into a policy document — a protocol for cultural intervention in emergency situations. The elaboration of *La fuerza de las palabras. Protocolo para una intervención cultural en situación de emergencia* [6], in short *el Protocolo*, was the result of a state-level response that aimed to capture and formalise the mediators' experiences, articulating a comprehensive strategy for crisis intervention.

Drawing upon a case study methodology that included interviews with reading mediators and document analysis, in this article we propose two new directions for current scholarship and policies regarding crisis and disaster management. First, we present the mediators' emergent process of responding to their affected communities in four critical stages: immediate recovery, stabilisation, development and consolidation. We focus on the mediators' process of response during these four stages to call attention to the critical role of new social actors who do not always depend on a pre-determined strategy or model to intervene. Second, we argue that such an emergent and distributed process should be strengthened and complemented by a protocol that supports and guides the work of these actors. In this case, the development of a cultural protocol was essential in strengthening the mediators' emergent actions. Similar protocols should be embedded within other forms of structural support that have commonly targeted food, shelter and personal security [7]. Both dimensions of the cultural intervention in the Mexican case, the mediators' emergent activities and the formalised cultural protocol, provide a unique comprehensive approach that could be modeled in other contexts to address the needs of all citizens in vulnerable post-disaster circumstances, including children and young people.

## 2. Towards new models of intervention in crisis management

Recent scholarly work in disaster management has made systematic attempts at moving beyond a polarisation of social actors in post-disaster contexts [8,9]. Traditionally, disaster intervention plans have relied on a top-down approach whereby authorities, state-level institutions, NGOs and other established organisations are the primary actors to control and intervene in crisis situations [9]. Drawing on the military tradition of providing immediate relief, these models have turned to authorities to ensure shelter, food and safety. However, such models are not sustainable or realistic unless we consider the role of citizens who, in most cases, join forces and contribute to local interventions.

To account for the role of citizen engagement in emergency situations, researchers have proposed collaborative and integrated models. Waldman et al. [3] explore how the increasing number of volunteers emerging in a post-disaster context can be channeled from emergent and distributed action to a networked response. New forms of participatory governance can enable citizens to contribute effectively to the post-disaster recovery process. To capture the important contributions that citizens make in an emergency situation, more flexible and diffuse intervention models have been proposed [3,10,11]. Such models of intervention take into account the critical role played by community members in the recovery process, as well as the increasingly important role of digital technologies [2–4]. For instance, Albris [2] discusses the role of social media platforms that open up new mechanisms for citizens to engage in emergency situations. Through these platforms, citizens who can help and those in need of help can be connected immediately and exchange resources and critical information. With immediate online access, citizens oftentimes merge their efforts and coordinate their actions with great efficiency, speed and spontaneity because they have access to social media platforms and other online outlets that help them act in a number of critical contexts [2,10].

Post-disaster interventions are, therefore, ecologies of interacting macro- and micro-social actors and infrastructures that provide immediate relief, security and care with all the available resources at hand. However, if we are to take a socio-ecological approach, we need to consider all the aspects that constitute these ecologies for a more

comprehensive understanding of the many forms disaster response can take [12]. From an ecological standpoint, care is not only about feeding and sheltering those in distress. We propose that care for the affected communities can be addressed via critical cultural interventions that can serve as a catalyst for responding and assisting post-disaster. Such interventions can reach some of the most vulnerable categories of a population, children and young people. With a focus on material reconstruction (e.g., rebuilding shelters and houses) and existent 'physicalist' models of disaster response [13], authorities can often miss the specific needs of the youth and their families, such as psychosocial and emotional support [14]. Cultural models can address these aspects if disaster response is understood in a broader framework and new social actors are acknowledged for their critical role in post-disaster response.

## 3. Post-disaster cultural interventions in Latin America and the background of reading mediators in Mexico

Culture is an important component of a post-disaster ecology and the process of recovery cannot be fully realized without the critical role that arts play in these contexts [15,16]. To recover, communities need safe spaces to review their emotions and engage in activities that relieve fear, tension, and stress. Individuals need and seek the company of others to ensure new resources for personal and collective strength; they need places which allow them to make sense of their past, present and insecure future and they can find solace in familial and cultural traditions to support them moving forward [15; p. 170]. Cultural interventions can encompass a wide range of practices and forms, from storytelling and drama to poetry, music, arts and crafts, dance and photography [17,18].

A few important cultural interventions in Latin America preceded the Mexican response and served as an informative basis for the reading mediators' actions and the development of *el Protocolo*. For instance, following the floods in 1999, in Venezuela, activities for the promotion of reading among children and youth were organised in various neighbourhoods in Caracas [6]. *Leer para Vivir (Reading for Life)* included training workshops where participants learned how to use storytelling, reading aloud and bibliotherapy as primary means of community engagement. Sessions in these communities continued for a full year building on the positive effects of sharing and reading books. Based on similar principles regarding the positive social and psychological effects of literature and the power of words, *Palabra Memoria, Palabra Vida (Word-memory, Word-life)* was developed in Colombia, in 2002–2003, and aimed to rebuild social ties among communities of displaced people after devastating floods and landslides [6]. Through the use of language, participants developed 71 personal histories, and recaptured the collective memory of their communities writing 32 collective histories. Finally, *Palabras que acompañan: La lectura en los tiempos de crisis (Words that Offer Company: Reading in Times of Crisis)* was implemented after the earthquake on February 27, 2010 in Chile [6]. The initiative supported children and young people to become long-term readers. It also developed sessions to train community members, educators in nurseries and schools and libraries to develop sustainable pathways of access to books to those with minimal resources.

These cultural programmes and initiatives did not provide only one model of response. Instead they offered practice-based guidance through regional projects, drawing on flexible, emergent and context-specific actions. What these cultural interventions did have in common was the fundamental focus on the power of words and literature to sustain the well-being and social ties of communities in very difficult circumstances (with a focus on children and young people). This foundation circulated across many countries in Latin America and served as the basis of reading mediators in Mexico as well.

In Mexico, the strong cultural policy, which was a feature of 71 years of the Institutional Revolutionary Party rule, resulted in the creation of nation-wide cultural programmes and initiatives through the Secretaría de Cultura. As the flow of families and unaccompanied minors from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador travelling through Mexico to the

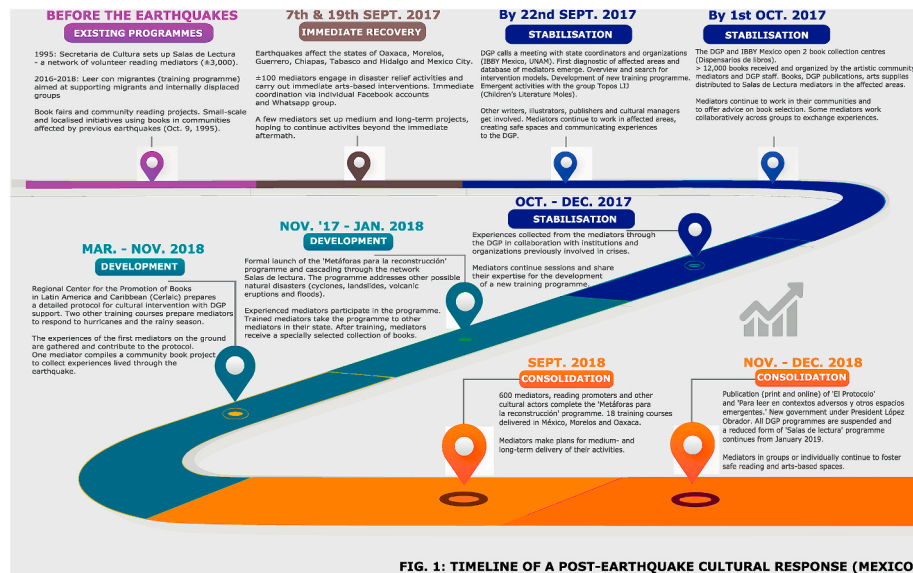


Fig. 1. Timeline of a post-earthquake cultural response (Mexico).<sup>3</sup>

United States increased [19], *Salas de Lectura* (Reading Rooms) was set up in 1995 as an official programme training ± 3000 reading mediators. The mediators were volunteers who were providing a weekly space for reading, storytelling and book-related activities anywhere they chose, from their living room or patio, to a corner in a market, a park, an orphanage, prison or even a cemetery [20; p. 125]. The only material support they received (up to 2018) was a yearly box of books and the support from trainers, invitations to annual meetings and events and a few online courses. Children's literature formed the backbone of their work, with mediators drawing not only on a rich oral legacy of traditional tales, rhymes and riddles in both Spanish and indigenous languages, but also on the increasing number of publications in (or translated into) Spanish.

During 2016–2018, in various *Salas de Lectura* mediators saw growing numbers of internally displaced populations, as well as migrants from Central and South America. *Leer con migrantes* (*Reading with Migrants*) was a new optional training programme developed by Evelyn Arizpe to support mediators' work with vulnerable, displaced children and their families. The rolling out of the programme was disrupted by the earthquakes in September 2017, but it later informed the more organised cultural intervention after the 2017 earthquakes. All these previous opportunities for community mediation and training enabled the mediators to emerge as a critical group of social actors in the aftermath of the two 2017 earthquakes.

#### 4. Methodology

In this article we focus on the mediators' post-disaster cultural response as a 'case study.' As part of the case study, we analyzed the unprecedented growth and flow of mediators' activities, as well as the institutional response through the development of *el Protocolo*. We conducted interviews,<sup>1</sup> we mapped out the process of post-disaster cultural response by taking into account the timeline when various activities were deployed, and we analyzed the documentation emerging around the mediators' activities. These sources of data constituted the foundation of our case study, which included a series of events, contemporary phenomena and contexts that converged to provide space

<sup>1</sup> To respect our interviewees' preferences, the interview dataset is not made publicly available due to the sensitive and personal nature of the accounts.

for analysis, synthesis and deeper understanding [21]. We offer this case study not as a prescriptive model, but as an example of how emergent cultural interventions can be captured, consolidated, understood and formalised for future practice in response to natural disasters and other contexts of crisis.

For this study, we designed twelve interview questions that we sent via email to seven female reading mediators and two coordinators<sup>2</sup> from the Secretaría de Cultura (SecCult) through convenience sampling, one year after the earthquakes. One of our team members, Evelyn Arizpe, had connections with representatives of the SecCult who sent out the interview questions to other mediators from their existent networks. The questions in the interview asked about the mediators' experiences in the aftermath of the earthquakes, the types of mediating responses and on-the-ground mobilization (organized and/or emergent), changes in the mediators' practice, unexpected or surprising lessons learned from the field. Ethical consent was obtained through the ethics process at our institution and all invited mediators sent lengthy answers to the interview questions that we then anonymised. We carried out a thematic analysis of the interviews that involved qualitative coding procedures well established in the literature [cf. [22, 23]. The interview themes were identified and grouped under the four stages that describe the process of the mediators' cultural response (immediate recovery, stabilisation, development and consolidation). Afterwards, we traced, compared and matched the interview themes with those included in *el Protocolo*. For instance, the need for self-care emerged as a common theme across multiple interviews. This was then traced and matched to a full guiding section on self-care in *el Protocolo*. This approach allowed us to identify the most recurrent themes across the interviews and the documents consulted, and to better understand the mediating process at each stage.

Overall, the themes that we present in the following sections capture 'context-dependent knowledge and experience' which lie 'at the very heart of expert activity' [24; p. 222]. The authors of this article had prior knowledge of other cases where children's literature had been used in

<sup>2</sup> Designated coordinators from the Secretaría de Cultura (Ministry of Culture) were responsible for overseeing cultural programmes across Mexico and, after the earthquakes, they developed training and coordinated book collections and distributions for reading mediators. They were also involved in the development of a national network of mediators and of *el Protocolo*.

contexts of displacement and vulnerability [25]. Based on this expertise, we were able to recognise the potential of the post-earthquake mediating experiences to serve as a guiding process that can be extrapolated and adapted to other contexts where cultural interventions are still emerging.

## 5. The process of cultural response

In reporting our findings, we will focus primarily on the emergent, complex and oftentimes messy response that finally led to the consolidation of *el Protocolo*. In doing so, we want to capture a different process whereby the model of intervention emerged organically, from the mediators' activities and in response to their lived experiences.

The timeline capturing the actions and sequence of events after the earthquakes presented in Fig. 1 includes four main stages: immediate recovery, stabilisation, development and consolidation. The four stages are specific to the reading mediators' response and do not have hard boundaries from one stage to the next. For instance, activities led by other artists than reading mediators in the stabilisation stage continued into the development and consolidation stage as well, and work towards the articulation of the cultural protocol began in the development stage with the organisation of the training course, *Metáforas para la reconstrucción* [26]. What is important to note is that across the timeline we can see a gradual intensification of reading mediators' activities, as well as a more coordinated and organised response which brought other social actors into the ecology of cultural activities, including regional and national organisations and institutions.

### 5.1. Immediate recovery

[...] without waiting to have precise data, we mobilized to help how we could, and we acted quickly without so much organization, but with a lot of action. (MC<sup>4</sup>)

Still under the shock of the earthquake but knowing that their families are safe, during the first few days after the disaster 100+ reading mediators began deploying their knowledge, resources and expertise in their immediate communities. The first type of aid most of them provided was the removal of debris, installation of shelters, transportation and distribution of medical aid, cleaning materials, food and clothing to the shelters that were set up. Once in place, the mediators turned to using their own expertise to provide the much needed cultural, emotional and imaginative support to help communities understand their new reality. The reading mediators resourced books and materials from libraries, personal collections or other mediators and started developing meetings and reading workshops with children, women, and the elderly in the affected communities. As one mediator remarked,

My role as 'mediator' in those moments of crisis was to gather the children, who were the most 'abandoned' while the adults were focused on finding food and shelter where to live [...] this is how the idea was born that I was to take care of the children while the adults were dealing with their material concerns. [MR]

The vast majority of mediators emerged independently, as critical actors in the recovery process of those living temporarily in shelters. As MRM noted, "[mediators] did not have an emergency care protocol; nor [did they] have a logbook for the registration and evaluation of experiences." Instead, they drew on their previous experiences from the programme *Salas de Lectura* (see section 3) and from general concepts of mediation developed in other training contexts. One of our interviewees had extensive experience having worked in hospitals, agencies of the

public ministry, charities, and crises situations (e.g., in a project of reconstruction of public memory in Colombia after the guerrilla violence through workshops based on storytelling). Yet, there were also a few mediators who had no training and, out of a strong will to look after the children, found themselves engaging in reading, arts- and play-based activities that they later found out to be in line with the cultural mediation process.

#### 5.1.1. The location of safe spaces

Given the material and structural conditions of different buildings, reading spaces included any physical location, still standing or open, where mediators could put books in the hands of those who gathered to read or share stories. Reading spaces became safe zones for children and adults alike as they imparted memories, reunited with lost family members and shared news about resources:

Some people popped in to see what it was about, they saw books and they'd leave but in a little while they'd come back. We did not have loads of people, but with those who arrived, mostly children, with them we began a quiet dialogue [...] they decided if they wanted to take the book, read it to me or have it read to them. [ML]

Schools and sports fields were turned into shelters, while open spaces such as alleys, markets, gardens all became useable for reading mediators to engage with small groups of participants. One of the mediators we interviewed turned her own house into a collection center for food and medical services, only to expand it a few days later into a space for book collection and distribution, as well as delivery of arts-based activities for children in her area.

#### 5.1.2. Arts-based strategies, materials and activities

What makes the case of reading mediators in Mexico quite unique is not only their ability to act with very little initial coordination, but also their approach. Children's literature, and more specifically picturebooks, was the main instrument of intervention and, more importantly, the critical element that helped to create a 'safe space' for those who participated in the sessions. Picturebooks, in particular, have proven ideal companions in addressing challenging topics such as increased migration [27,28], food poverty [29] or criminal justice [30]. Usually short in length or size, with captivating visuals and stories, picturebooks have been successfully used in challenging contexts (e.g., migrants arriving in new communities where they do not share the same language) and across different age groups.

Stories shared in picturebooks can provide counter narratives of danger, immediately reducing the impact of biologically induced stress [cf. [31]; p. 286]. As MM commented, books can "help (children) to feel safe, hopeful and joyful". When thinking about the ability to self-calm, books that emphasise positive emotions such as joy, love and humour could be used because they impacted on the emotional well-being among the participants and, likewise, for books that demonstrate problem-solving in order to provide models for breaking down larger problems into smaller and more manageable ones. Another mediator noted that the best types of books to use in such circumstances were 'distracting, entertaining and motivating [...] healing through the word.' Non-fiction books about earthquakes (and other situations of risk brought about by tsunamis, floods and fires) could also help answer questions about natural phenomena and provide knowledge surrounding the source of disaster [also see 7]. Both approaches can bring joy and knowledge to help children and families view their newly torn realities through different lenses and, therefore, make their environment more bearable and safe. Restoring such spaces was critical because this is where communities came together, preserved their social structures and shared intense emotions, traumatic experiences and future plans.

Besides reading and exploring books, mediators also engaged in sharing personal and family stories, inviting small dramatisations, movie projections, mask-making, dancing, drawing mandalas and

<sup>3</sup> Infographic vector created by pikisuperstar - [www.freepik.com](http://www.freepik.com)

<sup>4</sup> All the names of mediators who were interviewed for this research have been anonymised in this article.



painting, using music and breathing techniques for relaxation, playing games with words (oral and written), and listening respectfully to recently lived experiences shared by the participants.

### 5.1.3. Digital communication channels

As noted in recent case studies [2,4,32], digital communication becomes critical and integrated with on-the-ground emergency efforts. While many buildings had collapsed as a result of the earthquake in Mexico, the online networks remained active and facilitated flow of information, coordination of mediators and ongoing contact with the officials.

In the immediate aftermath, mediators used social media networks to ensure that their families were safe and, although their actions on the ground were in various locations, the informal network of mediators helped keep them in touch with each other. Resources and updates were circulated via WhatsApp, Facebook and Messenger, through groups that had been set up prior to the earthquakes. Some groups had an informal leader who was the contact person among mediators and the shelters affiliated with them, while others acted on their own. To avoid the 'bottleneck effect' [2] and distribute resources more evenly, online and phone communications were vital.

Each shelter had its own requirements and needs and the person in charge of each such space communicated with the mediators about the level of support needed and situational constraints. In the chaos of rubble, people and activities, online communications functioned as one of the few stable channels which ensured increased coherence in action and swift delivery of interventions: "mobile internet did not crash during the earthquake and allowed us to amplify our 'safe space', our tranquility, through telecommunications"(MM). One mediator, who at the time of the earthquakes was not in the country, could help coordinate mediators and consolidate the group *Abrazando Palabras (Hugging Words)* remotely, particularly because she had access to online platforms and was not under the stress that many mediators in Mexico were as they delivered activities in different communities.

### 5.2. Stabilisation

After the first sessions, reading mediators could get a better sense of what they needed to sustain their workshops for a longer period of time. If at the beginning they focussed on creating safe spaces where children and adults could share experiences in the company of books, the reading mediators began to feel the increasing need for a more robust coordination and training tailored to this post-disaster context. Several meetings with organisations and institutions such as IBBY México (International Board on Books for Young People), Secretaría de Educación Pública, the Autonomous National University of México (UNAM), the Vasconcelos Library and other branches of Dirección General de Publicaciones (DGP), under the auspices of the SecCult, enabled mediators to access books, share experiences and begin the first conversations about a possible training course for mediators in post-disaster contexts.

Some mediators began reflecting on the environmental impact of their work and aimed for developing sustainable activities. Concerned with the amount of garbage resulting from used drawings, toys and other materials used in the workshops, one of our participants engaged children in writing words of encouragement on the pavement in chalk. In communities such as Jantetelco, Jonacatepec, Tepalcingo and Axochiapan, participants painted murals as part of the process of showing gratitude and message of community support.

The SecCult established centres for collection and distribution of books selected and grouped by type and reading age, while individual mediators could approach these for checking out books for their communities. Many of the books had dedications and words of support to those affected. At the centres, information about available reading spaces was shared as well, particularly to those mediators who did not have a stable meeting place for their groups. On demand, the SecCult also provided materials: paper, crafts supplies, crayons, paints, etc. For

the mediators, having these centres and the direct contact with coordinators in the SecCult gave them reassurance in their continued practice. Having institutional involvement enabled mediators to feel visible and connected while their work was valued and supported. Calls from the offices of the DGP to ask mediators how they were doing encouraged them to continue work and to expand their activities. A few telecommunication companies joined efforts and provided free internet service where unavailable to maintain the social networks and on-the-ground initiatives.

The stabilisation stage also involved a first diagnosis of the affected areas and a database of professionals willing and able to help. Designated mediators began to organise the schedules and teams; some were placed in groups of volunteers with different skills (e.g., artists, teachers, journalists, psychologists, nurses and doctors). Other groups, such as TOPOS LJJ,<sup>5</sup> initiated a center for book collection of children's and youth literature to be distributed to the states affected by the earthquakes: Ciudad de México, Puebla y Morelos (MM). Gradually, mediators began to receive invitations to provide workshops in other spaces such as asylums, houses for the elderly and different shelters. However, the coordinators of the book centres felt that more could be done: "without an emergency response protocol, that fact remained there, as a sad experience for the residents of Oaxaca and an opportunity to reflect on our work in the face of this type of disaster" (MM).

### 5.3. Development

During the development stage, reading mediators continued their activities while keeping connected to their own local networks, but also with an eye on updates circulated on the DGP WhatsApp group that coordinated materials, resources and information. Sessions in the communities expanded and included other types of knowledge sharing, such as the use of medicinal cures and homemade recipes among others (MLO). As the mediators became more confident in their spaces and grew to know the needs of their groups, they began inviting other mediators and teachers into their safe spaces to exchange experiences.

An important element during this stage was the development of a full training programme in response to the mediators' work, entitled *Metáforas para la reconstrucción*. As Szente [33; p. 2] points out, contexts of crisis demand 'more trainings, practical experiences, and opportunities in order to work with children and families facing disasters.' It is not sufficient to have a box set with children's literature connected to the theme of disasters. The *Metáforas* programme was meant to strengthen and support reading mediators by exploring more systematically the use of literature and creativity as vehicles for meaning-making of lived experiences. The metaphors of 'mirrors, windows and doors' were adopted as the foundation for literary actions through the process of mediation [34], i.e. mirrors – reflecting on self and lived experience, windows – exploring the world beyond one's immediate reality, and doors – crossing a threshold to open up new meanings and understandings of a context. The long-term goal of this training was to support the creation of community libraries that would build collective memory and (re)construct social ties. Other training opportunities included workshops on how to provide emotional first aid kits and human development training delivered by a civil association.

Through the development of this training programme, the emergent activities of reading mediators were brought together and, through the sharing of localised practices, a clearer methodology emerged which was later consolidated in *el Protocolo* (see next section). The

<sup>5</sup> TOPOS is a non-profit civil association supported by volunteers who provide rescue, support and assistance services to anyone who is in a vulnerable situation. It began its activity on September 19, 1985, in the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Mexico City. The group was formed with volunteers who worked in coordination in the search and rescue actions for victims, whom people began to call 'topos' (trans. 'Moles').

methodology was informed by Michel Petit's [35,36] work on building individual and community resilience through children's literature and reading, as well as the work of Arizpe et al. on picturebooks in contexts of displacement [28]. By April 2018, the programme was delivered in "eight localities in Mexico City, five in the State of Morelos, 14 in the Mixtec region and nine in the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca" [6; p. 104].

### 5.3.1. Challenged and challenging practices

In the first two stages of the mediators' response, structured evaluations were not possible given the fluid and dynamic ways of working. With so many activities being delivered in numerous communities, the mediators could only share what worked well and what challenges they encountered informally, through online channels or through conversations with other mediators and community members. In the context of the training programme, *Metáforas para la reconstrucción*, the mediators were able to share with the coordinators of the SecCult examples of best practice, as well as their concerns and challenges. The most prominent challenges experienced in the first months post-disaster included:

- in the stabilisation stage, mediators constantly ran into each other in shelters where cultural activities were overflowing. In some cases, the presence of multiple mediators on the same site made the control of situation in that shelter much more difficult to manage.
- access to different shelters was limited to those who had authorisation to enter those shelters. Without formal institutional support and/or accreditation, some mediators could not gain access to groups in need.
- with increasing psychological and emotional imbalances, mediators needed more comprehensive and targeted methodologies for emergency situations. In other words, their prior expertise served them well but was also challenged by new levels of individual and collective stress, anxiety and fear.
- without a robust organisation, the help provided by some mediators could not be sustained long-term. In some cases, the participants lost interest or expressed boredom. In others, children expected to receive something material as part of these sessions and mediators could not go in "empty-handed or only with the books under their arms" (ML). Some mediators went in with sweets for the children, food for sharing, toys and posters for setting up the readings.
- some mediators were not aware of the ethical dimensions of their work: "Under the banner of solidarity, [mediators] began to post photos showing the fragility of others" (MM).
- without robust training, reading mediators frequently felt exhausted. In the interviews, they mentioned not knowing how to integrate self-care strategies into their work and, while fully dedicated to their communities, they did not have sufficient knowledge on how protect their own well-being.

These challenges, together with the mediators' experiences, helped shape the content of the cultural protocol in the consolidation stage. The increasing institutional and policy support helped strengthen mediators' cultural interventions as a holistic response and aimed to prepare this group of social actors for future emergency contexts.

### 5.4. Consolidation

To bring the mediators' experiences together, systematize their actions and address their challenges, the DGP in collaboration with the Regional Center for the Promotion of Books in Latin America and Caribbean (CERLALC), an intergovernmental organization sponsored by UNESCO, created a detailed 'manual' for cultural intervention. In November 2018, two digital books were made available for free download: *el Protocolo* and *Para leer en contextos adversos y otros espacios emergentes* [6]. The latter was an edited collection that describes the thinking and development not only of the *Metáforas* programme, but

also of *Leer con migrantes* (the earlier project providing support to migrant communities, see section 3).

The content of these documents was primarily informed by the mediators' emergent actions during the previous three stages: immediate recovery, stabilisation and development. In light of these experiences, *el Protocolo* proposed a general template for cultural intervention organized in three phases: prevention, assistance and stabilisation. Guidance for the development of *el Protocolo* was drawn from: (a) other programmes from Latin America that preceded the earthquakes in Mexico (see Section 3), (b) the methodologies developed through the *Metáforas* programme, and (c) previous expertise around the process of reading mediation.

Overall, *el Protocolo* was not developed as a top-down instrument of centralising action in case of future disasters, but as a guide to be used in the prevention stage of possible future crises or emergencies. The design and content of *el Protocolo* reflected many mediators' emergent and distributed actions, previously tested arts-based strategies, as well as a long-term commitment to using children's literature and arts-based methods for the reconstruction of communities that preceded the 2017 disasters. What makes *el Protocolo* quite a unique document is that it recognises the reading mediator as a key social actor with great impact in the process of reconstruction of social and psycho-emotional ties. As MM notes in her interview, "all our crisis intervention projects require the figure of a mediator or workshop leader who is capable of accompanying others in their processes of meaning-making."

*El Protocolo* was designed in two parts: (1) the action plan and the responsibility of state-level and other official agencies and organisations to work organically with reading mediators, and (2) a comprehensive guide for reading mediators that addressed their needs and challenges (as outlined in the previous sections). A substantial section dedicated to reading mediators offered extensive principles for ethical activities with vulnerable communities, sustainable practice, self-care and effective communication across social media networks. The appendices include step-by-step infographics on the order of activities from starting sessions with health and safety guidelines, introductions, 'literary' conversation, creative writing and some form of arts-based activity. These detailed guidelines in *el Protocolo* were possible particularly because the mediators shared their own extensive knowledge and practice from the ground.

Besides the launch of the cultural protocol, during the consolidation stage reading workshops continued to be deployed in now well-formed groups. Training workshops built more capacity among reading mediators who disseminated their activities in new locations including public libraries, schools, reading clubs and other cultural organisations. The national network of reading mediators has widened with plans to provide ongoing support for children and their families.

## 6. Conclusion

On April 7, 2020, Barbara Stcherbatcheff [37] wrote for the *World Economic Forum* about the power of artists who "offer hope amid the COVID-19 crisis". Citizens in many countries across the globe have had to face a different type of crisis that has led to systematic lockdown and physical distancing rules. Needing to self-isolate to protect themselves from contracting a new virus, citizens across the globe turned to culture and arts to maintain a sense of belonging and connectivity: "The arts help people to cope in dark times – even during a pandemic that prevents us from experiencing art and culture alongside others in the same physical spaces" [37]. Although current circumstances of the global pandemic are quite different from the post-earthquake context of 2017, the arts-based practices and the critical role of cultural providers have demonstrated their profound social impact in situations of crisis. Similarly, the case of reading mediators we shared in this article shows how a distributed, dynamic and flexible set of cultural interventions can accompany post-disaster efforts to support community resilience and safe spaces.

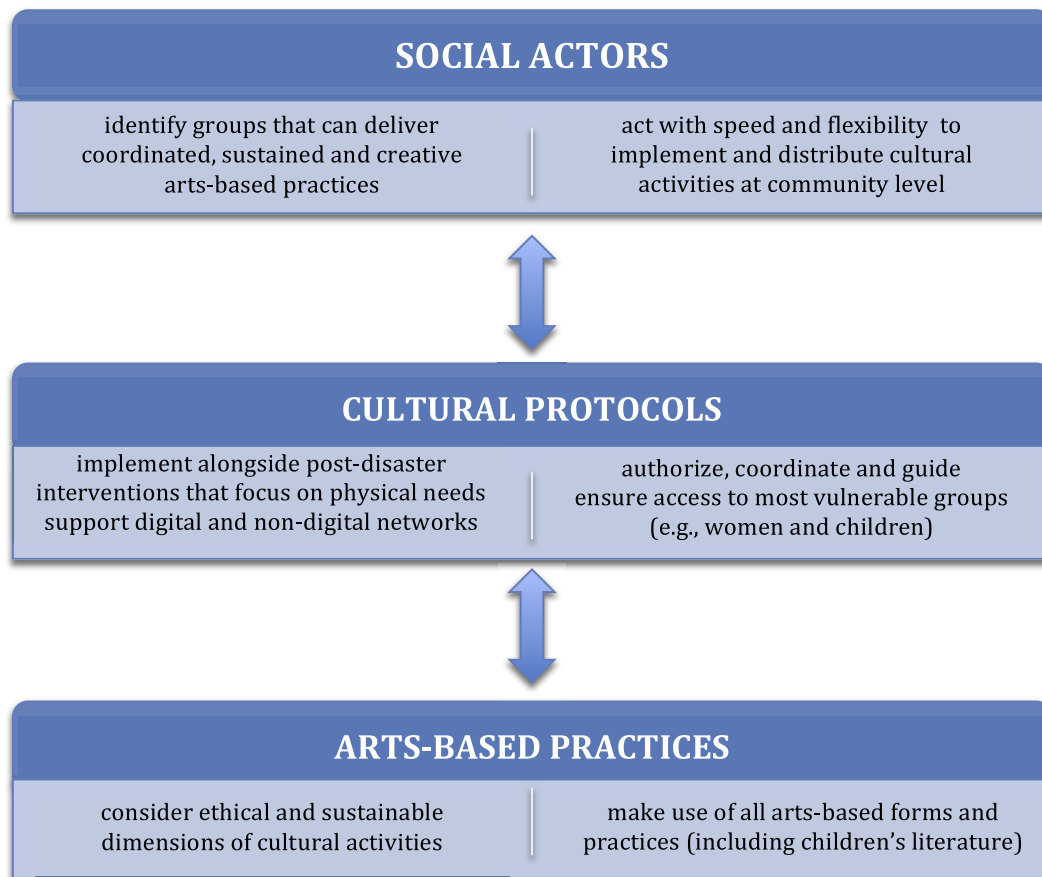


Fig. 2. Dimensions of cultural interventions.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the cultural interventions in the current global COVID-19 crisis, we would like to point out that online cultural responses deployed during this pandemic reached only certain groups of people and revealed deep-seated digital inequalities [38]. While online arts-based materials, ideas and videos for keeping people connected were free and open to all, only those with digital skills and access could take advantage of these cultural resources. To ensure the human right to culture for all [cf. [39], a cultural intervention requires an in-depth and targeted approach that reaches even the most vulnerable communities. Having a network of reading mediators who can act flexibly, speedily and with tailored responses to specific groups, as in the Mexican case, helps with a more sustained effort to engage with hard-to-reach communities. Based on the lessons we learned from our case study, in Fig. 2 we propose the following intertwined dimensions to inform policy-makers: Central to the process of policy formation is an understanding of the cultural protocol as a complex and integrated framework which takes into account not only the practicalities of conducting cultural activities, but also the ethics of cultural action, sustainability of arts-based practices, self-care and digital/non-digital channels of communication.

Disasters affect not only the physical and material dimensions of a community, but also the social and emotional connections that bond people together. In this sense, the case study of reading mediators in Mexico can serve as a model for “independent groups that join efforts to contribute to situations of human, social and cultural reconstruction and individuals who will promptly undertake the accompaniment and the mediation, with written culture and orality as their fundamental tools” [6; p. 28]. The four-stage process in which the reading mediators were involved and the emergence of *el Protocolo* offer a holistic approach to vulnerable communities and a distributed network of new social actors able to reach those in need. When protocols are reflexive and speak to

social actors implementing arts-based practices in contexts of crisis, they can provide alternative frameworks of being in a world that loses its recognisable social matrix.

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#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101797>.

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