

Material Deprivation and Human Wealth: The Importance of the Local in Peacebuilding

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Abstract

Mexico is one of the least peaceful countries in the world. Peace, however, is not limited to the absence of violence for it includes many other aspects related to attitudes, institutions, and structures in a society (IEP, 2021). In this regard, the municipality of Ecatepec in the State of Mexico is an illuminating case study not only for the absence of conditions for structural peace, but also for the impact this has on the perceptions and conceptions of its residents. This paper presents the results of qualitative research carried out in Ecatepec at the request of a dialogue group for peacebuilding. A total of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted for exploring the perceptions, conceptions, visions, and concerns of a sample of Ecatepec residents regarding issues such as security, absence of peace, and possibilities for peacebuilding in the community, and how peacebuilding is envisioned at a local level. The interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed in detail using the qualitative NVivo software; subsequently, they were coded using preexisting and emerging categories. The results revealed a high level of awareness of the structural factors underlying general and gender-based violence; they also showed the high impact of participants' own experiences, and those of people emotionally and physically close to them, in the social construction of perceptions about high insecurity and about what takes place in the municipality and country. The findings highlight the relevance of local policy, as well as the impact of citizen participation and organization in the municipality's communities due to the perceived neglect by authorities, and the need to find support and resilience mechanisms in the absence of basic elements to survive daily life with dignity. Several of the issues that emerged during the research have global relevance—for example, distrust of institutions. Therefore, the findings contribute to a better understanding of how peace breaks down and how it can be built.

Introduction

Mexico is one of the least peaceful countries in the world (IEP, 2021). The strategies implemented by three different administrations belonging to diverse political parties have not been effective in reducing the different kinds of violence that have proliferated for at least the last 15 years. Peace, however, is not limited to the absence of violence for it includes many other aspects related to attitudes, institutions, and structures in a society (IEP, 2021). In this regard, the municipality of Ecatepec in the State of Mexico is an illuminating case study not only for the absence of conditions for structural peace but also for the impact this has on the perceptions and conceptions of its residents in terms of what this absence of peace implies and their hope that the situation improves. Therefore, a national initiative called *Méxicos Posibles* (literally, “Possible Mexicos”), focused on strengthening processes of dialogue and collaboration between diverse actors in society,

decided to study this municipality to explore the conditions for initiating a dialogue in that area. To this end, it assigned a research project to our team, based on the methodology we have been using to conduct similar studies for several years.

Given the relevance of the issues that emerged during this qualitative research and the insights the study can provide about the absence of peace in Mexico, we decided to present the results in this paper. Several of those issues have global relevance—for example, how distrust for institutions builds, but, above all, that which essentially arises from one's own or very focused experiences and the chasm created between citizens and authorities. Other aspects of the study concern not only the existing deprivations but also their exploitation by power groups. Therefore, the results are relevant for not only Mexico but also contribute to a better global understanding of how peace breaks down and how it can be rebuilt (or built).

A total of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain an overview of the perceptions, conceptions, visions, concerns, and perspectives of a sample of Ecatepec residents regarding issues such as security, absence of peace and possibilities for peacebuilding in the community, and how such peacebuilding is envisioned at a local level. The interviews were fully transcribed and then thoroughly analyzed using the qualitative NVivo software; subsequently, they were coded using preexisting and emerging categories. The results showed patterns indicating a high level of citizen awareness of the structural factors underlying general and gender-based violence; they also revealed the high impact of one's own experiences, and those of people one is close to (emotional and physical proximity), and daily conversations—in contrast to the role of the mass media, for example—in the social construction of perceptions about high insecurity and about what takes place in the municipality and country. The findings highlight the role of citizen participation and organization in the municipality's communities due to distrust of the government, perceived neglect by authorities, and the need to find support and resilience mechanisms in the absence of basic elements to live with dignity. Our recommendations are aimed at shaping a dialogue process that considers these elements and actors, which could be relevant for other similar cases.

We first present some details about the dialogue group for peacebuilding *Méxicos Posibles*, as well as background information on Ecatepec. Next, we describe the methodology, general results, and more specific results based on the issues that emerged. Finally, we discuss the results and provide recommendations for a dialogue process in a context such as the one described.

About the dialogue group for peacebuilding in Ecatepec

Méxicos Posibles was established in 2015, formed by a diverse group of Mexicans with the main objective of promoting solid institutions and a culture of legality and strengthening the rule of law. As indicated on its official website, the organization hired “Reos Partners, an international consulting firm with extensive experience in solving complex problems in countries such as South Africa, Colombia, Canada, and Guatemala, and related to issues such as sustainability, energy, and education. Its methodology, Transformative Scenario Planning and Elastic Collaboration, allows actors with radically different visions to build a shared understanding of reality to subsequently carry out actions that lead to the most desirable scenario” (*Méxicos Posibles*, 2018).

To implement the same methodology at a local level, a small group comprising members of this organization was formed, with the aim of promoting peacebuilding processes in specific locations of the country. The most important aspect of this group is its emphasis on processes, in the promotion of and training in dialogue, bonding, and cohesion to gradually initiate discussion on central issues of the peacebuilding agenda in Mexico. With that in mind, the group selected the municipality of Ecatepec in the State of Mexico (26 km from the center of Mexico City) for starting its work.

For this, it was decided to prepare an exploratory diagnosis based on a series of in-depth interviews with various actors in the municipality. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain an overview of the perceptions, conceptions, visions, concerns, and perspectives of individuals in the localities where the dialogue group will work on issues such as security, absence of peace, and possibilities for peacebuilding in the community, and how those actors conceive peacebuilding at a local level. The emergence of concerns not related to violence or peace (only in appearance) was also considered—for example, concerns about lack of water or other services, or urban mobility problems. Another reason for conducting the interviews was to obtain names of possible candidates who could participate in the abovementioned peace dialogue.

Some basic information about Ecatepec

Ecatepec is inhabited by 1.6 million people, that is, the most populated municipality in the State of Mexico and one of the most populated in the country (INEGI, 2021). Of this population, 28.4% has a high school degree as the highest degree, and only 17.4% of the population has a bachelor's degree (DataMéxico, 2021).

The 2020 Population and Housing Census indicated that 355,000 people sought health care services outside the municipality (DataMéxico, 2021). The sector that concentrated the most economic units in Ecatepec was retail trade with 50.4%; the services sector corresponds to 27.2% of the economic units (DataMéxico, 2021). According to the *Flood Atlas* published by the Water Commission of the State of Mexico (CAEM), Ecatepec is one of the two municipalities most prone to flooding, which includes six locations prone to urban flooding (Government of the State of Mexico, 2021).

One of the biggest problems in Ecatepec is the lack of potable water. The problem is so serious that around 800,000 people who live in the fifth zone of Ecatepec, in the south of the municipality, have been living without water in their houses for years. To survive, the families in the area must pay from 100 to 160 pesos per thousand liters of water, which is enough for less than a week of regular use of water for four people. In response to this situation, around 1,600 families from 47 "barrios" or neighborhoods in Ecatepec filed a lawsuit for water shortage in May, 2020 (Adam, 2021).

There is also a sector of the population that does not have access to other services such as sewerage, bathroom, and electricity (DataMéxico, 2021). Among the basic services provided by the municipality, there have also been problems with garbage collection, with the municipal transport network, and with drainage.

Ecatepec is commonly known as a "bedroom city" since, due to the lack of job opportunities, many people are forced to travel daily for work. According to the data provided by the 2020 population and housing census, the average time to travel from home to work was 51.9 minutes, but 31.4% of the population takes more than an hour to get to work, which may include up to four hours commutes (DataMéxico, 2021).

Poverty is one of the most problematic issues that afflicts this municipality. According to data from the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, in 2019 Ecatepec topped the national list of municipalities with the highest rate of urban poverty with 786,843 people living in poverty (Suárez, 2019).

Furthermore, Ecatepec is the third municipality with the highest perception of insecurity in Mexico, according to the results of the National Survey of Urban Public Safety (ENSU). In this period, 87.7% of the people surveyed in the State of Mexico indicated that they felt unsafe (Martínez, 2021).

Conceptual framework

This research used the methodology employed in a series of previous studies, which were based on a holistic view of structural peace (Galtung, 1985; Alger, 1987). This theoretical perspective argues that negative peace—that which should not exist for a society to be considered at peace—is the absence of violence as well as the fear of it. Conversely, positive peace comprises factors that constitute, activate, and sustain peace. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) has conducted research that demonstrates the existence of eight basic areas or indicators in the most peaceful societies worldwide, known as the eight pillars of peace, or to put it in other words, the DNA of peace: “(a) a well-functioning government, (b) equitable distribution of resources, (c) free flow of information, (d) good neighborly relations (or social cohesion [author’s note]), (e) high levels of human capital, (f) acceptance of the rights of others, (g) low levels of corruption, and (h) a solid business environment” (IEP, 2018, 52).

Of all the components of negative and positive peace, our previous studies have focused on two central issues: (a) fear and its psychosocial effects in Mexico, and (b) perceived absence of the free flow of information. These issues are important because evidence shows that the prevalence of fear and stressful environments tends to have negative impacts on issues such as democracy, inclusion, respect for the rights of others, tolerance, trust in democracy and justice institutions, and, in general, support for peace processes (Bateson, 2009; Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, & Hobfoll, 2009; Carreras, 2013; Ceobanu, Wood, & Ribeiro, 2012; Demombynes, 2009; IEP, 2018, 2019; Ley, 2014; Morris, 2012, 2013; Siegel, 2007; Wilson, 2004; Wolf, 2016).

With that in mind, we carried out an exploratory study in 2011–2012 on the incidence of symptoms suggestive of post-traumatic stress disorder in the Mexican population (Meschoulam & Calderón-Abbo, 2019, 50). Subsequently, we carried out a series of four qualitative studies using hundreds of interviews and a quantitative study in a nationally representative sample (Meschoulam et al., 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020). The following were the main findings of this series of investigations:

- A. The major components of the participants’ social construction of their perceptions and conceptions of the violence in their country and the possibilities for peace were their own experiences, and those of people close to them, their own observation, and their conversations with friends, family, colleagues, and associates. These three categories alone comprised more than 60% of the content of the issues the participants discussed during the interviews.

B. The above showed an important contrast with the print media, radio, and television as social constructors—these three emerged much less frequently as elements influencing the participants' perceptions and conceptions of violence and peace. This did not mean that traditional media were not used but rather that the participants indicated that, compared with their own experiences, observations, and conversations with people they trusted, these media were not reliable sources of information and knowledge about what was happening in the country. Instead, the participants expressed many negative feelings such as anger, rejection, and even rage toward the media, which they perceived as part of the corrupt system that, in their opinion, characterizes Mexico.

C. Similarly, the major social constructor of the feeling of fear or terror—one of the most recurring issues in the interviews—was the participants' own experiences, and those of people close to them, and conversations. However, according to them, the media also played an important role in spreading fear as they were sensationalistic, showed too much violence, and intentionally spread terror to control public opinion for their or the government's interests (Meschoulam et al., 2017).

D. The distance participants claimed to have put between themselves and traditional media such as the two main television networks, most listened radio stations, and most read newspapers in the country was related to two main factors: (1) their distrust of these media based on the perception that they were manipulated by the government (whom the participants greatly mistrusted) or the country's power elites and were, therefore, part of the structure of corruption, crime, and violence; and (2) the negative feelings that, in their opinion, the media triggered in them, such as anger, stress, anguish, fear, hopelessness, and apathy, through sensationalism, excessive exhibition of violence and blood, and the lack of respect for the victims of the situation in Mexico in the years these interviews were conducted.

The results of our quantitative study (Meschoulam et al., 2020) confirmed most of these patterns in a national sample.

The research carried out in Ecatepec in 2021 was based on this conceptual framework and adopted a methodology similar to the one used in the abovementioned studies by developing a protocol tailored to that municipality and based on research questions specific to this project.

Research questions

The following questions guided the present research:

- A. Which are the major concerns of a sample of Ecatepec residents regarding the absence of peace or peacebuilding in their community and why?
- B. Which other concerns emerge, even if they are not apparently linked to violence or peace?
- C. Which could be some basic ideas that could help conduct the first peace dialogue workshop?

- D. Who could be the key actors to be invited to the workshop?
- E. Which are the key issues of the peacebuilding agenda that should be discussed during the workshop?

Methodology

A total of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted with Ecatepec residents. Of these, 29 were conducted in the traditional manner (interviewer-interviewee); one was of a journalist from the municipality, interviewed by several members of *Méxicos Posibles* together; and one was of two residents together.

Participants and sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used that, though did not represent the municipality's entire population, sought the greatest possible diversity. The sample comprised 18 men and 14 women—of these, six were in the 18–24 age group, 23 in the 25–59 age group, and three were aged over 60. To ensure diversity, residents having varied incomes and occupations were selected (some participants are included in more than one category): seven civil society activists, three retailers, three teachers, four parents, two political activists, one blacksmith, two factory workers, one housewife, one communicator, one school administrative staffer, three students, one working with a development foundation, three members of civil associations, one member of a religious association, one pastor, two priests, one industrial plumber, one nurse, one policeman, one mechanic, three former prisoners, one working at a stationery store, one tow truck driver, one mechanical engineer, and one journalist.

The ethical and legal processes of contacting and recruiting participants and conducting the study were supervised by the Mexico Research Center for Peace (CIPMEX, AC) for absolute compliance with the Mexican Law on the Protection and Security of Data and Information. Each interviewee signed an informed consent form prior to their interview.

Data collection

Data were collected in 27 interviews conducted via Zoom and four carried out in person in the municipality. Zoom was used for logistic, security, and health reasons, considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Several tests were performed to ensure that the results derived from the Zoom interviews did not differ from those derived from the face-to-face ones.

Data analysis

The data analysis method of previous studies carried out by CIPMEX (Meschoulam et al., 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020) was adopted. The interviews were fully transcribed and then analyzed using the qualitative NVivo software—several preexisting categories derived from two pilot interviews with key stakeholders from the municipality and from previous literature and research were used. Words, sentences, or entire paragraphs were coded within these categories to detect patterns and repetitions, as well as possible emerging categories—the latter were some of the most recurring in the study. Saturation of the main categories was observed in the initial interviews—this pattern was maintained, with slight variations, until the completion of all interviews.

Reliability

The study's reliability was ensured by using various methods to control bias: (a) the interviews were conducted by 12 different researchers and the analyses were performed by nine—repetitions and patterns in the results were nevertheless confirmed; (b) we interviewed, as indicated above, residents from varied socioeconomic strata; (c) the data collected were shared and verified by the whole team to minimize potential individual biases; and finally, (d) the results were compared with those obtained in previous investigations to confirm consistency in the patterns—all patterns were confirmed despite the described control measures.

Limitations and transferability

Despite the sample's diversity, the results cannot be transferred to the entire Mexican population, or even to the entire population of Ecatepec—they exclusively concern the 32 interviewees (of our 31 interviews). However, the repetition of patterns detected throughout the process was quite high; therefore, although not conclusive, the findings do seem to highlight initial indications about how the process of social construction of the interviewees' perceptions of violence and peace in their municipality is shaped. The patterns detected in this study can well be the basis for a series of hypotheses that could be tested in the future through quantitative research with larger samples, both in this municipality and other parts of Mexico or elsewhere.

Therefore, what we have is a series of first signs that allow us to understand the issues of greatest concern in Ecatepec; which could be the key aspects on the peacebuilding agenda for that municipality; the actors that should participate in the dialogue; and clues on how fear is socially built and, perhaps, on how to reverse the process or at least mitigate that fear.

Results

This section presents the study results. The first part presents the overall results. In the second part, the results have been disaggregated by issue/topic—that is, under the six main topics used for a closer analysis of the detected patterns: A. Issues related to violence and peace, B. Gender-related issues, C. Socioeconomic issues, D. Sociopolitical issues, E. Issues related to authorities or the government, and F. Major deprivations and problems in daily life.

General Overview

This table summarizes the 10 most recurring categories in the interviews.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Structural peace or structural violence | 277 | 100% |
| Personal experience | 242 | 93.6% |
| Insecurity | 242 | 100% |

| | | |
|---|-----|--------|
| Citizen or community participation or organization | 231 | 96.8% |
| Ineffectiveness of authorities | 214 | 100% |
| Key actors for dialogue | 192 | 80.7% |
| Corruption | 160 | 87.1% |
| Social and economic gender inequality | 138 | 74.2% |
| Crime in general | 135 | 87.10% |
| Fear or terror | 130 | 96.77% |

Table 1.0: Overall results

These results can be summarized as follows:

Social constructors: Personal Experience

This refers to the main mechanisms the interviewees used to socially construct their perceptions, ideas, values, and opinions about what was happening in their environment and country.

The category *Personal Experience* emerged constantly in our previous research (already validated in a national quantitative study, see Meschoulam et al., 2020). Participants from our studies have tended to talk mainly about their own experiences, and those of people close to them, their observations, and what they talk about with their neighbors, colleagues, or acquaintances. These elements tend to be trusted much more as sources of information and social construction of perceptions and values than others such as traditional media or even social networks.

Ecatepec was no exception. In the present investigation, this category recurred on 242 occasions (hereinafter, frequency, or f) during the interviews. Ninety four percent of the interviewees spent a big part of the conversation to tell us about their own experiences or those of people close to them—these included stories, anecdotes, or aspects of their own life and those of their family, friends, colleagues, and associates to exemplify, validate, and confirm what they told us. Here are some examples that illustrate this recurrence:

Look, I don't even know what to think... In November my husband came at 1:30 AM, he went to the wine shop for his soda. A Hummer Van came...no...a Black Wolf Van, and took him up. They took him and a boy who was there. We never thought we could ever ride inside such a luxurious van. They took them both up, and they took money from them because the other boy had just taken money out of an ATM, they were following him and they thought my husband was with him. They threw them into Leilani's territory, and they had to walk back here. They left them at Tecámac and they returned at 3:00 AM, it was an express kidnapping.
(Retail Trader)

I have heard so many things from close family members, from friends, who have been victims of crime, as I myself was a victim at the time. They assaulted me ... they had a pickaxe, it seems to me, the truth is that I didn't really know what weapon it was, but apparently it was a knife, a pickaxe, I don't know what it was. And well, they took my things, my money, this ... they also even tried to grope me.

The person I was with was also robbed ... And so were my relatives, well, not all of them, but unfortunately, they have also been victims of crime and well, yes, that's why everybody is afraid. (Student)

The state policemen, trust me, they have earned their bad name very heartily. Once I was walking, that is, imagine, I was walking! I had no alcoholic beverages, I had no drugs of any kind, I had my IDs ... they (policemen) detained me. Because I was "making noise on the street". And now, I say, "Well, let's see, show me your report, right?" Just to know, if it came from a person who is pointing out that it is me ... They wanted to put me in jail for theft. When I arrived at the public prosecutor's office, I was accused of stealing with a knife, a knife that I didn't even have on me ... And just in one moment, my life was going to change. (Industrial plumbing worker)

I think that what we are experiencing are very unfortunate conditions because practically one can no longer lead a normal life, because we are afraid of doing things, well, I don't know, we are afraid of going to a university, doing our daily things. Because there is a lot of fear that you may be assaulted, or you may be the victim of some circumstance beyond your control, so I consider that what we live here is very regrettable. The truth is that no ... There is a lot of crime and that makes us feel very insecure. Not only ... mainly women, because Ecatepec is one of the municipalities with the highest rate of murders, of femicides, so you should be much more careful when you get on public transport. (Activist)

This recurrence is key in many ways. Among other things, it reveals the importance of implementing public policy, measures, and actions at a local level that can impact daily life and citizens' experiences, not as a replacement for measures implemented at a regional, state, or national level, but rather along with them. Conversely, if the decision-making does not have an impact on people's daily experiences, it is almost impossible to transform citizens' perceptions of relevant issues such as their safety and well-being.

Our research team paid much attention to possible mentions about the traditional media and digital social networks. In line with our previous research, those mentions were extremely low in number. In summary, the interviewees essentially spoke to us based on their own perspective and situation (or of those close to them).

Major concerns

Thus, due to personal experiences, and those of their family members and people close to them, the participants' most relevant concerns included the feeling of insecurity, with a high number of mentions of assault and crime in general during the interviews. All this naturally feeds the feeling of fear or terror, highly prevalent among the interviewees.

This last issue—fear factor—is also key because, in the long run, a peacebuilding process cannot prosper in an environment marked by fear and tension (see, for example, Wilson, 2004; Siegel, 2007; Hirsch-Hoefler, Canetti, Rapaport, & Hobfoll, 2016), and, although reducing violence in the municipality is not necessarily among the objectives of *Méjicos Posibles*, the issue of fear must be added to the discussion agenda: fighting

violence is one thing; fighting the fear of violence another, and they do not necessarily walk in parallel.

It is striking, however, that the concerns the interviewees expressed were closely accompanied by the feeling that the authorities were ineffective, deeply rooted in their perception of neglect and excessive corruption. According to them, the authorities had not only failed to do their job, but had taken advantage of the situation for personal gain, leaving Ecatepec's communities to their own fate. Again, this was not something they had learned through the media but rather through situations they or their relatives or others in their community had experienced firsthand.

From these concerns emerged three major issues this study focused on, perhaps the most relevant results:

A. Structural peace and violence

Although the specific terms "structural peace" or "structural violence" were not used by participants, this was the most recurring issue during the interviews—it emerged 277 times and all interviewees spoke about it at least once.

As if the interviewees were familiar with the specialized literature on violence and peace, they tended to describe what happens in their municipality not just as visible or palpable events of violence, but mainly as a series of structural conditions that trigger this violence. Thus, they exhibited a high level of awareness of the factors at the root of violence, such as precariousness, inequality and corruption, political conflict, and power groups' neglect of citizenship (absence or weakness of the government), as well as the exploitation of existing deprivations to profit from people's needs.

The interviews essentially project a citizenry who understands very well what happens in their municipality and in the country, a citizenry who understands why this happens, and who considers that it would be impossible to build peace if the factors that originate its absence are not properly solved. Consider these interview excerpts:

Well, look, I rather think there are problems, and because of those problems we have insecurity, not the other way around. So, does security cause other problems? No. I believe that the problems we already have are the ones that make you feel insecure. Mainly the lack of jobs, the lack of public institutions to have our young people studying, the lack of job training because there are those who don't have enough money to study, but who could enter a technical school of commerce, carpentry, bakery, something that may keep young people busy, and that later on, will produce income so that they, their relatives, don't have the need to commit crimes. Come on, there are children who even steal candies; if their parents could give them some money, at least for a candy, they would no longer steal it. From there we can start, right? (Municipal Police Officer).

But there you have a phenomenon, the income issue is huge, the issue of overcrowding too, but you cannot think that the State of Mexico or territories like Ecatepec have such levels of violence just because there is too many people...We cannot speak of organized crime if there wouldn't exist a political arm, a business arm, a criminal arm, then there are a series of issues related to the mafias that generate highly violent dynamics with no way out. (Activist)

...Because without human rights, that is, if we cannot satisfy our basic needs... or, how do you think we could engage each other peacefully? In other words, if we don't have an education for peace and human rights education, how can you learn to mediate our daily conflicts? (Community Center Collaborator)

Then, unfortunately, those boys are put in jail and they keep them there for almost eight months, ten months, for stealing a radio from a car. It's wrong, they become worse in prison. So, what they have to do with those guys is "You know what? Give back the radio", and he's going to have to wash the street, I don't know, something like that. Because, how does an 18-year-old boy end up in prison? They lack opportunities... (Blacksmith)

B. Citizen participation

Another among the most recurring issues was related to the participation and organization of Ecatepec residents to address their own problems—it was mentioned 231 times, with 97% of the interviewees referring to it. This was largely due to the perception of a historical neglect of the municipality by different governments and political actors, the lack of basic services, and, therefore, the need for the residents to organize themselves to solve their own problems.

Interviewees provided countless examples showing these factors. Some of them include the following:

Look, I like to participate. I know some guys, here in the neighborhood, in San Cristóbal, who like to participate because they are social leaders, those gentlemen. Those social leaders, with no pay, without asking for anything, they are trying to fix the problems they see on the streets, and there they go, there they go, although public officials don't let them in, they still wait there until someone at the municipal offices lets them in, which is when they achieve something. (Blacksmith)

People join together; in fact, the other day, the barbecue guy wanted to settle in a green area in the Americas (a neighborhood) and the neighbors didn't let him. Neighbors gathered signatures and they came with the lawyers and drove the people away from occupying lands, because they should not be establishing there... for example, here in the neighborhood there are many professional citizens. That is what gives you a bit of knowledge to be able to demand your rights. (Psychologist)

I have had to organize people. I have had neighbors who organize themselves in different neighborhoods, they do things, and have done incredible things. It's just a matter of continuing to build citizenship and giving them more tools. People are agglutinated through political parties because those have been able to bring people together. But there is a lot of social material in the communities, there are many people out there who can do many things, that is like ... they are only eager that they may have opportunities to be able to do those things and, uh ... voluntarily. I think it is important to change the discourse, to assess how all these things exist in this municipality, which is very large and has many problems, but it also has many talented people. (Foundation Employee)

There are more female leaders in the neighborhoods, no doubt. People always tell you about the gossipy lady, right? But we have misclassified them, and people say, "Oh no, it's the gossipy lady over there, the one who goes around gossiping". And you say, maybe she is the gossipy lady, but she is the gossipy who solved the water supply for you, who prevented the power cut off, who got the park fixed, right? I think that those ladies misnamed "gossipy" are rather community companions... (Civil Association Official)

What I think right now—and it is because I honestly doubt people who have the answer to everything—the only thing that I feel is viable, are those processes that are carried out by the groups that are born from the organizations. (Activist)

For example, the crime issue, the disappearance of a girl or boy, the issue of a woman who is kidnapped, and her daughter is killed. So, I feel that this is, like, the potential of the neighborhood, when we come and say, "We are going to have a meeting". I don't know... we just say: "We will meet to find a response to this issue of so many robberies", and people do meet, because they know that it is a common problem. (Social Worker)

I want to tell you that I have a WhatsApp group, we are not many, we are approximately 50 colleagues, and we try to act with honesty, with responsibility, we try to be efficient in our work, and we help each other. The WhatsApp group is for that, sometimes we need stationery, and we ask each other for it. Sometimes we need it, we are not all-powerful, and sometimes we need advice, what one colleague doesn't know, sometimes the other does. And it is in this way that we have sought self-help. Sometimes in the absence of coordination with our own police corporation, we have opted for that, to help each other in every way we can. (Municipal Police Officer)

C. Issues related to insecurity

Peace is not limited to the absence of violence or the feeling of security, but it does include them. Negative peace is defined as the absence of violence as well as the fear of it (IEP, 2020). As is evident, these issues are not related only to violence or material crime—they encompass people perceiving that they live in an unsafe environment; thus, they are not at peace, and it becomes difficult to build it. These were among the interviewees' major concerns—all of them mentioned insecurity at least once, its total mentions being 242, while 90% cited crime as a major concern.

Results by major issues/topics

To provide a clearer overview of the most recurring issues, we grouped those issues under six nodal topics and employed a specific approach for each. Below are the most repeated mentions, under each topic, during the interviews.

A. Issues related to violence and peace

The table below presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Structural peace or structural violence | 277 | 100% |
| Personal experience | 242 | 93.5% |
| Insecurity | 242 | 100% |
| Crime in general | 135 | 87.1% |
| Fear or terror | 130 | 96.8% |
| Drugs and addiction | 111 | 74.2% |
| Assaults | 101 | 83.9% |
| Normalization of violence | 95 | 77.4% |
| Feelings of helplessness, sadness, frustration, and anger | 88 | 71.0% |
| Homicides and murders | 76 | 83.9% |

Table 2.0: Issues related to violence and peace

It is worth noting here that, in addition to the most recurring categories mentioned before (such as structural violence and peace, insecurity, and personal experience), the interviewees highlighted *crime in general* and *assaults* as factors having a daily impact on them—these were mentioned 135 and 101 times (f) by 26 and 27 interviewees (i.e., 80–90%). Moreover, the participants showed high concern for drugs and addiction (f=111; 74% mentioned it at least once). For instance:

The truth is that I've had many close situations, perhaps not me directly, but with close relatives, and I consider that the situation is going from bad to worse. Before, at least you said, well they just mug you, right? and that's it. But now, there is always something beyond, where they even damage your physical integrity. So, it's a worrying situation that is getting worse, no government has achieved any decrease. Not with the PRD (Democratic Revolution Party), the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), or the PAN (National Action Party). (Communicologist)

I can tell you that I have met people who were very good at their job, but someone gave them drugs and then they lived selling drugs even with their children. This is something that is tremendously affecting our community. (Church Pastor)

Prevalence of the perception that violence has become normalized is especially noteworthy (f=95; 77% mentioned it at least once). This contributes to negative feelings, including

helplessness, sadness, frustration, and anger—this was mentioned 88 times during the interviews by more than 70% of participants. Consider this example:

I have seen it myself, because on several occasions they have left bodies here where I live. I tell you, in less than four minutes I get to the corner really fast, and regularly, they leave bodies on the sidewalk, or in the middle of the street. It is common. One neighbor said, "Well, I really jumped it (a dead body), because I was on the sidewalk and I preferred to jump it because I was in a hurry" and I said "Wow, we have reached impressive levels (of normalization)". (Civil Association Official)

We emphasize these aspects because our previous research (Meschoulam, 2019) has indicated that it would be difficult to think of a peace dialogue process without concurrently addressing such negative feelings. This is discussed further below.

B. Gender-related issues

This table presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Social and economic gender inequality | 138 | 74% |
| Structural gender-based violence | 127 | 83.9% |
| Direct gender-based violence | 92 | 77.4% |
| Domestic violence | 55 | 67.8% |
| Femicides | 53 | 71.0% |
| Disruption of routine due to previous experiences | 40 | 58.1% |
| Patriarchal chauvinist culture | 33 | 48.4% |
| Sexual violations | 25 | 38.7% |
| Sexual aggression | 14 | 29.0% |

Table 3.0: Gender-related issues

As shown in the table above, the most recurring issues during the interviews were structural, which include gender-related social and economic inequality ($f=138$; 74% mentioned it at least once) and gender-based violence ($f=127$; 84% mentioned it at least once). This is in line with our research in general: the interviewees' deep awareness of systemic factors and causes underlying visible or direct violence, also frequently mentioned in the case of that based on gender ($f=92$; 77% mentioned it at least once). What is also noteworthy is that 71% and 68% of the interviewees mentioned the issues of femicides and domestic violence at least once. Here are two examples of these categories:

I also think that their work and accompaniment (of women) is very badly valued. For example, this thing of saying well she is "the gossipy", instead of saying "She is the one that accompanies us all, and that she also feels this way". As she is the community caretaker, we should value what she does, community caring or companionship. I think it is very important to state clearly what they do for the community. (Civil Association Official)

In regards to violence, there is also a lot of violence against women. It is very common that there are cases of women who have been physically violated, verbally, or even femicides, or attempted violence, rape or attempted femicide. So, violence against women is at its highest levels, unfortunately, even in this pandemic, as in other places, it has worsened but it has been like that for years. Women have been raped for a long time, right? Nowadays it has become a little more visible due to all the feminist boom, fortunately. (Community Center Collaborator)

There were several additional issues to consider under this topic.

Two factors stood out when we conducted our tests to compare male and female interviewees. First, for the most part, the most recurring issues were almost the same for both, a sign of our results' internal reliability. However, in line with our previous research, "fear factor" had a considerably higher frequency among the female interviewees ($f=70$; all of the 14 mentioned it at some point) compared with the male interviewees ($f=53$ in the 18 men). Moreover, the latter tended to refer to visible gender-based violence such as sexual assaults, femicides, and domestic violence more than to structural gender-based violence; it was mainly the female interviewees who highlighted structural issues such as social and economic gender inequality.

Although it is not possible to carry out statistical significance tests for this sample considering its size, and therefore, results are only exploratory, the abovementioned is nonetheless a remarkable finding that provides relative evidence to hypothesize that structural gender-based violence and peace may be more prevalent in the feelings, perceptions, and ideas of women than of men.

All these factors should be considered for their relevance within the agenda of a dialogue process for peacebuilding in Ecatepec.

C. Socioeconomic issues

This table presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Unemployment | 71 | 67.7% |
| Recovery, improvement, reintegration, and hope | 62 | 58.1% |
| Effects of the pandemic, COVID-19-related issues | 53 | 61.3% |
| Lack of resources to meet basic needs | 41 | 41.9% |
| Free time, leisure, and idleness, which can cause | 30 | 32.3% |

| problems | | |
|---|----|-------|
| Migration of outsiders to Ecatepec | 27 | 51.6% |
| Overpopulation | 27 | 45.2% |
| Low-paying jobs with long work hours | 24 | 35.5% |
| Informal work | 23 | 41.9% |
| Lack of social security | 19 | 29.0% |

Table 4.0: Socioeconomic issues

Although socioeconomic issues were not among the top 10 most mentioned ones during the interviews, we considered it important to find out the extent to which these were among the interviewees' concerns. A detailed review revealed the following:

1. The interviewees were considerably anxious about unemployment ($f=71$; 68% mentioned it at least once), a concern that adds to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic ($f=53$; 61% mentioned it at least once), and more than 40% spoke at least once about insufficient resources to meet basic needs. This is a typical mention about this topic:

I believe that the reason is the lack of good income jobs. Here in Jardines de Morelos (a neighborhood), I'm going to tell you about my neighborhood, the biggest source of work was public transportation. As a result of the "Mexi-Bus" being launched, many, many people were taken off their jobs. There were people who committed suicide because they lost their jobs. That is one factor. (Retail dealer)

2. More than half of the interviewees (58%) mentioned the possibilities for recovery, the hope they maintain that the situation will improve, showing impressive resilience, at least in spirit. This is just an example:

Right now, when we are in the land project, that truck that is out there, was horrible, horrible. It was only a "shell", and my pastor told me, "How about it my friend? We are going to fix it, and we are going to buy that land for the elderly..." And well, when he said that, I told him "That's great". But I didn't believe it, do you understand me? It was just a comment. But suddenly, Monday came and Carlos said "Bring the crane, let's put the truck here and rebuild it" ... and, well, we started ... boom ... boom ... boom ... and 5 years, and ta ... ta ... ta, and well there is the truck. I think this was just impossible; he had received that land from a donation, but he didn't want it. He said that with the fruit of that truck, we were going to pay for that land and that all the people had to help with 1,000 pesos each ticket to help the elderly. That is his dream. And I said "Yes, pal, God willing yes!" and the tickets were sold out. (Driver, former convict)

3. More than a third of participants highlighted the risks posed by unemployment, that is, the problems idleness can cause—for example, those related to insecurity. Consider this interview excerpt:

By not being busy, then they go for the “easy life”. They go to steal things from people next door. It is natural, they need money. They have to have a job. I say that a young man who doesn't have a job has to look for himself. What is the first thing they do? He is approached by a criminal, and they get excited, but I say that the main thing for youngsters is work and education, that there be open education for everyone. They commonly don't have opportunities to study, for the same reason. Just earning a small salary; nowadays salaries can't even pay for transportation anymore. (Blacksmith)

D. Sociopolitical issues

This table presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Citizen or community participation or organization | 231 | 96.8% |
| Sense of community | 114 | 71.0% |
| Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination | 83 | 54.8% |
| Family involvement and values, and parental care | 78 | 61.3% |
| Lack of participation; apathy/avoidance/habituation | 74 | 74.2% |
| Religious groups | 71 | 45.2% |
| Teachers or professors | 69 | 87.1% |
| Protestors and social protests | 66 | 67.7% |
| Lack of attention to youths and children by parents | 58 | 54.8% |
| Activists | 54 | 48.4% |

Table 5.0: Sociopolitical issues

In addition to the issues already explained above, such as citizen or community participation or organization, it should be noted that, for some interviewees (61%), this topic is specifically linked to the participation of families in terms of values and education provided by parents. It is important to consider that our sample included several participants who tended to talk about religious subjects and groups (f=71; 45.2% mentioned them at least once). In general, 54% of interviewees believe that the lack of attention by parents to youth and childhood are contributing factors to the social decomposition. This is an example:

I believe in values, I believe a lot in that, if you as a leader of a group, in this case, of a family, seek to promote or strengthen those values, but you really do it, you can help make good people. But if you teach young children to lie, or you don't pay much attention because maybe they told you a little lie, or because they didn't do their homework well, or because I don't know, they have no respect for others, then we are lost. Because then, how am I going to tell him later that it is wrong to lie when I always let him lie and never say anything to him when he lies? How am I

going to say something to him when he doesn't do his job if, as a child, I did his homework for him, or allowed him not to finish it? How am I going to tell her that she should be respectful or even that they should respect her if she didn't experience respect at home? That is why the issue of values for me is basic in this matter.
(Communicologist)

In any case, what stands out in this topical area is the role of activism, citizen participation and the sense of community that is generated through that participation, in contrast to the participants' distrust of those institutions that have abandoned them; a necessity to get together and organize themselves (either as families, as organizations, as neighborhood groups, as groups of teachers, or as protesters), in order to deal with their unmet most basic needs. This is typical mention about this theme:

There are many ways... I, for some time, belonged to a group of runners. We were all from here, from my community. Then, there were people who came and asked for support. We provided it. We'd take him for a run, get them distracted and all that. Perhaps it can't be said that we solved many of their issues, but we have gained one or two souls. And just with the fact that they stop drinking or smoking, for us it is a big change. (Retail dealer)

Despite this, there were also several mentions regarding a perceived apathy in some sectors of their community. Certain participants expressed their frustration as a result of the appreciation that a part of the citizenry does participate and is active, while there are people who are not. This theme received 74 mentions, and 74% of the sample expressed in those terms at least once. An additional issue has to do with the absence of skills for dialogue perceived by 61% of our sample. An example:

Now, I understand the people who does it (block someone on social networks) because they have felt hurt and say, "I don't want you anymore in my life". I understand that. But you do get me when there is a broad public discourse that says "man, you said that and you are canceled, and you're canceled forever" ... and people already live with fear of cancellation, and that is generating a kind of, I don't know ... I think there are things that we would have to think a lot about and that goes beyond our political positions. These are just devices that we put to work permanently regardless of whether you are pro rights or anti-rights, right? But we are using these same devices to annul ourselves and that is shit. (Activist)

E. Issues related to authorities or the government

This table presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Ineffectiveness of authorities | 214 | 100% |

| | | |
|--|-----|-------|
| Corruption | 160 | 87.1% |
| Dissatisfaction with authorities | 118 | 77.4% |
| Lack of attention or support from authorities | 90 | 74.2% |
| Local governance | 84 | 77.4% |
| Abuse of power | 66 | 58.1% |
| Collusion between authorities, criminals, and delinquents | 61 | 64.5% |
| Impunity | 61 | 58.1% |
| Poorly trained personnel | 34 | 45.2% |
| Lack or failure of crime prevention strategies | 31 | 54.8% |

Table 6.0: Issues related to authorities or the government

This topic reflects the enormous dissatisfaction and frustration of the interviewees with past governments and authorities, especially local ones. As mentioned, several of these themes are among the highest recurrences in our interviews. But in addition to this, it is worth noting that more than seven out of every ten participants feel that there is a lack of attention or support from the authorities; 58% spoke about the existing abuse of power; 64% perceive that there is collusion between the authorities and crime (a recurring node in different investigations that we have carried out in other parts of the country, *vg. Meschoulam, 2019*) and six out of ten are concerned about impunity.

In addition to anger and negative feelings towards the authorities, 55% of the interviewees considered that there are no effective strategies to prevent crime and almost half of them thought that the authorities are poorly prepared.

Interestingly, there were 84 mentions among 77% of participants about the need to implement local government management strategies. This node is highly consistent with other factors that we pointed out previously and exhibits the need to develop public policies and local actions, energizing actors from the municipality in order to address the major concerns that emerge in the interviews. Any process of dialogue for peace will need to take that into consideration. Here are some examples taken from the interviews:

The truth is that I have read about Ecatepec being the petty cash of the political campaigns in the State of Mexico. What do I mean by this? On many occasions, the State of Mexico governors use the resources of Ecatepec—because they receive a lot of money, although not enough, I clarify, but a good sum, here from the municipality of Ecatepec—and they take this money to carry out their political campaigns. Obviously illegally, but they do it, and also, because a large amount of the budget that comes to Ecatepec is used precisely to carry out proselytizing acts, that is, acts that are convenient for them and instead of spending that money, I don't know, on building hospitals, or building schools, I don't know, anything else, because they use it for, well, to buy, I don't know, anything they wish... food supplies for example. (Student)

When there is a problem, and you call for a police patrol, it never comes. (Nurse)

Because let's say that the president sets a "model policeman", but policemen will always become corrupted here. If they happen to catch a drug dealer, the drug dealers will offer him 50,000 pesos (2,500 USD) when, to earn that, he has to work several fortnights. (Municipal Police Officer)

Well, very simple, the cartels put money into the campaigns of politicians, and that implies favors, that is the truth. So, who rules? Organized crime. They decide who runs for municipal president, they decide who runs for governor, and even at some point they decided who was going to be the country's president. (Activist)

F. Major deprivations and problems in daily life

This table presents the most recurring categories under this topic.

| Categories | Number of coding references | Proportion of interviewees mentioning it at least once |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Lack of opportunities | 88 | 74.2% |
| Shortage of water | 87 | 80.7% |
| Need for cultural and recreational activities (music, sports, workshops, forums, discussions, etc.) | 81 | 74.2% |
| Lack of education | 76 | 77.4% |
| Shortage of various public services (other than water) | 74 | 80.7% |
| Necessity of or difficulties in building the social fabric | 58 | 41.9% |
| Lack of public investment | 37 | 48.4% |
| Social programs to create politico-electoral preferences | 32 | 48.4% |
| Lack of lighting | 25 | 61.3% |
| Lack of mobility services | 22 | 35.5% |

Table 7.0: Major deprivations and problems in daily life

The deprivations in basic services were a recurring issue. Altogether, this research shows 208 occasions in which the 31 people interviewed indicated that they were concerned about lack of basic needs. Specifically, 81% of interviewees highlighted the shortage of water; a similar number of participants spoke about the absence of other public services; more than 60% mentioned the lack of electricity and 35% reported being concerned about the lack of mobility services.

Beyond these basic themes, it is noteworthy that 74% of participants spoke about the lack and need to have cultural or recreational activities, which includes sports activities, workshops, forums or conversations; 42% told us about the difficulties to rebuild the social fabric and 48% highlighted the absence of investment in their community.

These factors are also consistent with other studies we have conducted (please refer to the conceptual background) and do matter. Perhaps, public policy designers or analysts might think that, faced with such a level of deprivation and lack of services such as water or electricity, citizens may solely be preoccupied about those basic needs. These results highlight, however, other types of necessities such as culture, recreation and above all, the wish for an environment in which they can interact and have a solid social fabric. When these factors are scarce, this is added to other types of deficiencies, which, in an atmosphere of high insecurity, represents a perfect storm for people's lives and dignity. Here are examples of these mentions:

So, it's a lot of things, right? I say, "How the hell are we going to talk about peacebuilding? How the hell are we going to be able to reconcile regarding any problem, if we don't have the most basic needs solved?" (Community Center Collaborator)

Here, we get water every 28 days, so I'll make it easy for you: Tell me if our community isn't hurt. Yesterday, we had no electricity for almost two hours, and we were online. Transportation is very expensive. To go to "Indios Verdes" it costs 23 pesos. It is very expensive, multiply 23 pesos by 2, plus the subway ticket because the bus only gets you to "Indios Verdes", and back, and since it is 2 to 3 hours, then you need to get a sweet at least, because your stomach requires it. Expensive transportation, insufficient electricity, water every 28 days...The streets are crap; if you have a car, you almost have to lift it with your hand because there are holes and bumps; our community is very hurt. (Mechanical engineer)

Spend time together ... I do believe that more such efforts can be generated, if there were more Christian meetings ... well, not necessarily Christian, but people who joined and spent time together, it would be very good. (Driver, former convict)

Cultural or sports activities, basketball, volleyball, guitar competitions, dancing, singing, theater. People lack culture, here in the State of Mexico, that is missing so much. If you go to Mexico City there are many places with sports and cultural activities. Yes, I know that we are also well behind in sports and culture there, but at least there is more than here. Yes, in the city there are more ways to get some culture, but here, there aren't, there is a lack of movement, push, call. (Retail dealer)

Discussion

The above results highlight several aspects simultaneously:

First, there is high awareness among the interviewees of the unresolved structural factors underlying the absence of peace, such as deprivations, weakness of institutions, corruption, negligence by political actors, poverty, and inequality, therefore, thinking about peacebuilding processes that do not consider these factors is insufficient and ineffective.

Second, the interviewees have come to these conclusions based on their own experiences, and those of people close to them, and daily conversations. Their distrust of institutions causes, at least partly, that for validating a piece of information or statistics, or to build an opinion about their environment and the country in general, they have to rely on their personal experiences or those of people whom they trust.

This shows the relevance of local policy and, for any peace dialogue, of the need to work locally, include local actors, and formulate focused strategies.

Third, the importance of citizen participation and organization in this municipality to cover some of the gaps and needs not covered by the social and political system is evident. This also reveals the need to include a significant number of neighborhood and community actors as part of the peacebuilding exercises.

Fourth, the most recurring issues during the interviews highlight the enormous area of opportunity that exists for a dialogue process. For example, it is urgent to rebuild the bridges between those who govern—highly perceived as corrupt, inefficient or poorly trained authorities, who have neglected the municipality—and the battered citizens forced to organize themselves and solve their problems on their own. However, at the same time, the dialogue must support mutual listening, allowing those who govern to express their views, as well as establish channels between the various actors who make up the complex social fabric of the municipality.

Fifth, it is necessary to work for not only the material well-being but also the emotional well-being of the residents. This includes thinking about how to mitigate the psychosocial effects of the fear of violence and including sports, art, culture, and recreation in the agenda—these are not less important, for they contribute to rebuilding the social fabric and human relationships.

Finally, this series of issues is not relevant only to a specific municipality, or to Mexico as a country. Distrust of institutions, corruption, and citizens distancing themselves from governments or traditional media, are global issues deserving attention (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). This study provides some indicators to formulate hypotheses that could be confirmed by research in other parts of the world—for example, the role played by people's own experiences and by local policies in the social construction of perceptions of the possibilities for well-being and peace.

Recommendations

Based on the collected evidence and obtained results, our recommendations for a possible peace dialogue in the studied municipality are as follows:

1. **Actors:** We identified a wide range of actors who could participate in the dialogue. The highlights of the list of actors concern our own results. We point out two: a) the perceived sense of neglect by and frustration with the authorities, and b) the role of community participation and organization at a local level. This naturally leads to the need to be inclusive in the selection of potential participants for the exercise and to ensure the presence of all governments (local, state, and federal), legislative and judicial powers, as well as law enforcement agencies, organizations, collectives, women, and—most importantly—community members.

2. The process: Our study reports a perceived lack of skills for dialogue among actors. This, along with the perception of neglect and distancing, forces us to be emphatic about the process—it is essential to train the different actors in dialogue strategies, elastic collaboration, and conflict resolution.
3. Issues: Given the results, we propose a thematic balance between two major findings, (1) structural peace and (2) everyday experience (the value of the local). Dialogue workshops could ask questions such as the following: What is needed to address the socioeconomic and structural factors that build peace from the root, and at the same time, how to translate this into a positive impact on people's everyday experiences? The aim should be to ensure that the different participating actors can collaborate to achieve this balance, at least in the discussion, and spark ideas to make collaboration that goes beyond the exercise a reality.
4. Emphasize what can be achieved. Due to the endemic nature of many of the issues highlighted in the interviews, it is important to ensure that a possible dialogue in Ecatepec does not cause frustration among its participants but rather concentrates on discussing and developing viable ideas, no matter how small they seem.
5. For this, we propose not only training the potential participants in dialogue strategies, but also including some activities in workshops and exercises that show the relevance of structural peace (for example, the fight against inequality and corruption) and of local strategies for peacebuilding, such as strengthening the social fabric, neighborhood or proximity policing, sports, art, and cultural activities, or local tools for peace education.
6. Fear and peacebuilding: This issue—one of our major findings, and more prevalent among the female interviewees—is strongly related to points 4 and 5 above. Unfortunately, it is often neglected, and the negative impact of collective fear on dialogue and peace processes is ignored. We propose that at least one or two sessions on what is known as “inner peace,” stress reduction, or other strategies implemented by specialized personnel be included in the workshop. This section of the workshop would have two objectives: (a) to have a positive impact on the participants, which contributes to a better outcome of the exercise (Meschoulam & Calderon, 2019), and (b) to demonstrate the power of these simple strategies, thus opening up the possibility of expanding them to other parts of the municipality. These tactics, coupled with other stress reduction strategies, including sports and art, can help facilitate dialogue.
7. Gender perspective: Based on the findings, we propose that equal participation of women and men be ensured, and some of the abovementioned gender issues be included in the discussions/exercises. For example, not only mentioning homicides, but including femicides, and not only discussing criminal violence, but including domestic and gender-based violence in the speech; thus, not only talking about peacebuilding, but include peacebuilding with a gender perspective.

Conclusions

One of our interviewees mentioned that Ecatepec residents were not aspiring for the “American dream,” but only for the “Mexico City dream”. In Mexico City, despite all its problems notwithstanding, people can, at least, walk down the street, have a coffee, go to a movie, or look at trees; these simple pleasures are absent in Ecatepec. How can peacebuilding be addressed among the residents of a municipality whose main concerns are centered on the most basic aspects of daily life: personal and material safety, access to essential services, or mobility to go to work?

The scope of the qualitative research presented in this paper does not extend to a discussion on all the causes or factors responsible for the municipality’s current situation; it isn’t even possible to transfer the results to its entire population. However, it provides some important clues, and these could lead to ideas, perhaps, for not only the municipality but also other parts of Mexico and the world: on the one hand, the need to have an impact locally and from the root, and on the other, the apparent contrast between the numerous material deprivations and the extensive assets that exist thanks to the human wealth of citizens who have had to learn to adapt and solve their complex daily problems, and, as indicated in this study, need to dialogue, and need to sustain hope for a better future. It is from this point—human wealth—that a possible peacebuilding exercise must start, whether here or in any other part of the world.

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